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[A WOMAN'S WAR.—LADY GERDA ON HER TRIAL.]

MORE THAN A BROTHER.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Of all the large party assembled in Wray Hall that night there was only one who felt happy, and that was Lord Fitzmaur. His heart throbbed with an almost fierce delight. He felt as if he were stealing away with Sir Oriel's ewe lamb, and that the Baronet's tongue was tied because of his negotiations with a very fine sheep.

His own love gave him some insight into Sir Oriel's feelings. Would he think anyone in the world was good enough for Cora Paget? Not likely. If the lover were of good birth there would be something against his fortune, disposition, or appearance; no one would quite come up to the mark of his own particular pearl amongst women.

Surely she meant to say "yes," though with girlish modesty she shrank from him at first.

That was natural, and he liked her all the better for it, but then she yielded so far as to

take out the rose which rested on her breast; and though it was shattered and lost when the boat was upset, it had at least shown him that she was softening towards him.

In the next room to him was Lord Moor-town. His pale, refined face was colourless as marble, his eyes were sullen with the despondency of lost hope. He was writing a letter which, to judge by his expression, gave him no pleasure, and his portmanteau was already packed, so that Beatrice Ashley, when she came down to breakfast, might find him gone.

Further down the corridor was Sir Oriel—in bed, but wide awake—a prey to many anxieties. Down in his heart of hearts he confessed that Gerda Stanton, though she still bewildered him by her beauty, disappointed him to a certain extent by her ways.

Her thoughts, her feelings, her wishes and ideas all ran in such a different groove to his own, for he was prone to think of others, and busy himself about arrangements for their comfort or happiness, and Lady Gerda rarely thought for anyone else except herself and Lord Fitzmaur.

Sir Oriel had been accustomed to go to church on Sunday morning as regularly as clockwork, but he found that Lady Gerda was apt to complain of a headache on that day, the natural consequence of late hours every night of the preceding week.

He could not say that the headache was fictitious, but he thought it just as likely as not that it would not have kept her from a race or a concert.

It was also evident that she would not take kindly to any work amongst the tenants, who had always looked up to the mistress of Wray Hall with a sort of affectionate respect, which is rapidly going out of fashion; and if Cora were to be banished to the Dower House, he would never know when any of them were in trouble. Mr. Owen would inform him if their roofs were tumbling in or their windows broken, but he would never discover the private griefs and sorrows which they used to pour into Miss Paget's sympathetic ear.

Sir Oriel did not go into detail and think out these thoughts as we have printed them, but every now and then an uncomfortable idea would intrude upon him just as he was

going to doze, and through it all there was a sense of discomfort in his engagement which certainly clouded his joy.

And then, above all, was Lord Fitzmaur's proposal, which filled him with dismay. To give his cousin to any man, if he had all the virtues of an archangel, would be distasteful to him; but his heart beat fast with indignation at the bare idea of surrendering her to his future brother-in-law.

And yet what could he allege as an excuse for refusing his consent if Cora accepted him?

Lord Fitzmaur was a man of the world—that vague term which implies so much and tells so little! He was often in debt, and always addicted to pleasure, but if he married he would possibly settle down, and as far as Sir Oriol knew there was nothing particularly against him.

The light of early morning was streaming into the room by the time he came to the conclusion that he would give his mother to insist upon a year's probation. Who could tell what might happen in a year?

Comforted by this thought he at last fell asleep, long before Lady Gerda, who, in a distant wing of the large house was pacing up and down her bedroom like a tigress, lashing herself into fury.

If she had dared to do so she would have gone to Cora's parent, and poured out upon her small head some of the fierce indignation which was nothing like heated lava in her heart.

But the doctor had said that if she were kept quite quiet he anticipated no bad results from the accident, and if she had forced an entry into her room the whole household would have sided out against her.

No. She could not go to her, but she could hate her as much as she hated herself when Raymond Lovell turned from her in disappointment and disgust on hearing that she was a gambler. He had turned from her. This last folly had driven the noblest man she knew from her side, and forced her into marriage with a man she could never love. Could she throw it all up, turn over a new leaf, and live for a higher aim than dissipation?

Could she do without the constant round of engagements which deprived her of the misery of being obliged to think, and gave her constant occupation?

Could she live in a tiny house with two servants, and worry herself to death about the housekeeping? Could she wear cheap clothes, employ a cheap dressmaker with a villainous cut, and regard a Paris bonnet as a luxury far beyond her means?

Could she endure to have her beautifully-shaped hands and feet disguised by ready-made gloves and boots? Could she bear to be a nobody whom no one thought it worth while to court and flatter, whose opinion no one would consult?

Would it be possible to step down from her high estate, desert all the associations of her past life, begin a new life on a different level, and yet be happy?

Oh! if Raymond were only older, with his abilities he might rise to anything, and even a Marquis could not think it derogatory to give his daughter to the Lord Chancellor.

But Victorine's bill would not wait for twenty years, and that little debt to Lord Moortown must be defrayed at once. Pressing necessities were crowding in upon her, and time to reflect or consider was short.

Lady Gerda went downstairs the next morning looking like a ghost, but there was someone else who almost kept her company.

Beatrice Ashley had walked home from the lake supported by Lord Moortown's arm, and on the way to the Hall he had pressed her again to promise to be his wife.

Her heart was torn in two. Love on one side pleaded because with wondrous eloquence, whilst duty sternly repeated, "Send him away. He will lead you on the broad path, further and further away from Heaven!"

And with the steadfastness of a martyr

she had sent him away, and gone sadly and broken heartedly to bed.

"Perhaps he would not go," she said, to herself, trying to extract a ray of comfort from the thought that she would see him again at breakfast.

She got up in good time, though she scarcely felt equal to the exertion, and dressed herself with scrupulous care, and came lightly down the stairs looking right and left from under her long lashes to see if his tall form were anywhere in sight.

A servant came forward and handed her a note. She knew the handwriting at a glance, and a sharp pang shot through her heart.

He would not write to her if he were still in the house, and therefore he must be gone! Oh! Heaven help her!

Alone in a small room which was not often used, she opened the envelope and spread out the sheet of paper with the coronet and crest at the top of it. A little shiver ran through her as she read these words,—

"You showed me so plainly last night that I had been living in a fool's paradise for these last few years that I will never plague you again. Therefore, I go away without saying good-bye, and it may be years before we ever meet again. I hope you will be happy as a lonely old maid, but I know you won't, and if you ever do marry I shall feel awfully disposed to thrash your husband. It is an awful shame that we didn't go under together last night in the lake, for then I should have had you for ever.—Yours, "Moortown."

The tears came slowly into the large blue eyes, and the pretty lips quivered.

It is a very different thing to urge a man to go when you are sure he won't stir, and to tell him to depart, and be instantly taken at your word.

A horrible blank was left behind—a blank which nothing could fill.

Lord Moortown had been the one particular ray of her quiet life, and she could not fancy what it would be to live without him; never to hear his loud, peremptory knock on the hall-door, as if he meant to say, "Come in I will, and not all the Miss Mackenzie in the world shall prevent me!" his eager step on the stair, which was wont to make her drop her needle and set her heart beating irregularly; his tall form standing in the doorway, his blue eyes seeking her out, however much she was hidden in a retired corner; his smile, which on the dullest day made bright sunshine in the quiet room.

How could she live without them? Oh, life would be grey and cold, like a dull November day!

Sir Oriol looked at her as, after a long interval, she took her place at the breakfast-table.

He had received a hurried note of apology from Lord Moortown, so he could guess what was the reason of those pale cheeks and heavy eyes.

He was specially kind to her in consequence, and, in order to draw her out of herself, appealed to her for advice and sympathy about his different plans on the estate.

She responded gratefully, and in her sweet unselfishness soon forgot her own sorrows in the difficulties and sufferings of others.

"And how is Bill Tomkins going on?" she asked presently, for she had been accustomed to going about the village, basket in hand, with Cora, and knew many of the villagers by name.

"Oh, I've great hopes of him," answered Sir Oriol, cheerfully. "He has married Kate Graham, and she's sure to do him all the good in the world."

"Poor Kate! I am so sorry! He is not half good enough for her!" she said, regretfully. "What a miserable life they will lead together!"

"Not a bit of it. He will become the pattern man of the village. I've great faith in woman's influence," with a smile. "The worst man's ears are often open to a girl's voice when they are shut to everyone else's."

"My aunt always says that a bad mandrake a woman down," she said, with the tears in her eyes.

"Then she has less faith in woman than I have. I think I must give her a scolding," he said, with a quiet smile.

"Oh, how I wish you had done it before!" she exclaimed involuntarily, her whole heart in her voice.

"Why didn't you ask me? It's not too late. I'll write to him to-night, and tell him to come back."

"Not for the world!" blushing crimson; and then, utterly unable to control the tears which brimmed over and ran down her soft cheeks, she got up quickly from her chair, and left the room.

Sir Oriol looked after her with the utmost compassion in his glance, and this was what he thought,—

"That old aunt of hers, worthy creature that she is, will end by breaking the girl's heart, and sending Moortown to the dogs!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

"Come, come into the library. I have a question to ask you," said Sir Oriol, gravely, as soon as she came downstairs.

"Only one?" she answered lightly, though her heart felt heavy as a wooden ball. "Then our conversation will not be trying to our tongues."

He said nothing, only shut the door behind her, walked to the hearth-rug—"an Englishman's stronghold"—and turned round to face her.

"Is it true that you have accepted Lord Fitzmaur?" he asked, very seriously.

Her face, which had been very pale, flushed red as a poppy.

"Did he tell you that I had?" she asked, hesitatingly.

"I ask you. Have you accepted him or not? Please give me a straightforward answer!" with the dignity of a Lord Chancellor.

Sometimes a straightforward answer is beyond one's capacities, although it seems the simplest thing to ask for.

Cora bit her full, red lips, and looked down on the ground in a way that was very different to usual.

"An answer, please!" more civilly than he had ever spoken to her before.

She looked up appealingly, like a child to its mother.

"I can't, Oriol! Indeed, it isn't my fault!"

"You can't—what?" utterly mystified, and growing irritated, as men often do. "For Heaven's sake, speak out! You generally do without the smallest difficulty!"

"But—but this is different. You see, just as we were talking about it, the boat was upset, and, as the waters came over my head, I couldn't pop out a 'Yes.' Does he think I did?" anxiously.

"He does!" sternly; "but if there has been any mistake I can easily explain it to him," visibly relenting.

"I dare say he's right. Don't say a word to him. Why shouldn't I marry as well as you?" in a tone of infinite sadness.

"How do you know that I'm going to be married?" without a smile.

"I knew it in a moment. You couldn't deceive me!" flashing one look at him of infinite scorn. "I saw it in your face—your manner, your ways. Don't I know you better than anyone else? Oh, it was cruel not to tell me!"

His heart ached at the note of pain in her rich, soft voice.

"Don't be angry, Cora! I had promised to keep it dark at present."

"But I was different. Have you ever tried to keep anything back from me before? You couldn't have done it if you had tried."

"Then, of course, I didn't try!" with a smile. "But this has nothing to do with

Fitzmaur. Let us sit down and have a chat."

Side by side on a sofa of stamped brocade, he, lounging with his arm resting on the back, his face turned towards her; she, sitting bolt upright, staring straight in front of her, her lips pressed tightly together, an expression of "No surrender!" on every feature.

"You don't really mean to marry him, Cor?" Sir Oriel began, in a tone of gentle expostulation. "He's not the fellow to suit you. He's not half good enough for you."

"Did you wait to ask me if Lady Gerda were good enough for you?" she said, very quietly.

"The question is, am I half good enough for her?" he answered quickly. "I'm struck with amazement to think she cared to have me. Have you heard how Lord Elverton shot himself for her sake? and how young Kinnerton threw himself into the Thames because she refused him, and heaps of others who've nearly lost their senses?"

"Lord Elverton was overwhelmed in debt. Perhaps that had something to do with it; and Mr. Kinnerton is said to have married a shopgirl, and hadn't the face to tell his father. Perhaps one story is as true as the other," her lip curling with scorn.

"You've only to look at Gerda's face, and that's enough to account for any amount of madness!" hotly.

"It seems so," very drily.

"But I'm not here to speak of my own affairs," trying to restrain himself.

"Perhaps they are more interesting to me than my own."

"That's nonsense," ungraciously, because the remark made him uncomfortable. "But at least that proves that you don't care a straw for Fitzmaur. Now listen to common-sense. You've got a comfortable home for now and always; in fact, I don't know what my mother would do without you."

"I am afraid the can't look after the puppies when you're away, or keep The Rajah from gaining too much flesh," her lip curling once more.

"The dogs and horses must be taken care of by the people I pay to look after them," with a frown. "That sort of thing might be all very well when you were a girl in short petticoats; but, now that you are out, you'd have had to give it up anyhow. An 'out' young lady can't be running in and out of the stables all day."

"I don't think the society of dogs and horses is half as contaminating as that of human beings," she said, excitedly; "and nothing and nobody should have made me give up my visits to the stables. Lady Paget of course could not do it, but Lady Gerda was not too fine a lady to run about the stables at Wigmore, so I suppose she can do it at Wray!"

"She will do nothing of the sort—but we are talking of her brother. Cora, tell me frankly, is he the sort of fellow whom you would like to see at the head of your house, with the welfare of the household in his hands?" fixing his eyes upon her tell-tale face, where the rich colour was rising rapidly. "Fancy his expression if you proposed to him to read 'family prayers'! Fancy your own feelings when you were preparing to start for Richmond, and he insisted upon driving down to Richmond for dinner at 'The Star and Garter'?"

Cora shrugged her shoulders, though inwardly she winced, horribly.

"He would have to go alone, that's all."

"And you imagine that he would drive off as meek as a lamb? You don't know Fitzmaur. You can't believe that he cares for you. Give him up, Cor! When the first glamour is over, you'll lead the life of a cat and dog, and believe me," very earnestly, "it will do you no good either in this world or the next."

She was silent, but it was not the silence of inattention. Deeply agitated, indeed, to the very depths of her heart, she was shaking from head to foot; her hands and feet cold as

ice, her head on fire, her heart aching with an indescribable pain. It was all she could do, by a violent effort, to restrain herself from a passion of tears.

"If he only were worthy of you," he went on, presently, having waited in vain for an answer, "I should be so awfully glad to have you married to my brother-in-law. Then we need never be separated for long. You could come and stay with us whenever you liked, and we could come to you whenever you chose to ask us, besides meeting at scores of places every day in the week when we were all in London."

"Don't! don't!" she almost gasped, while a terrified look shot from her eyes. Wasn't it for this, and this alone, she had sacrificed herself? Could anything else have induced her to marry Lord Fitzmaur, and patch up his worn-out fortune with her own?

"Now, Cor, tell me the truth? You never did tell me anything else, to do you justice. You don't care one brass farthing for the fellow!" leaning forward till his face was very near her own.

She shrank back as far as she could, looking like some poor animal at bay. Oh, if someone would only take him away before she broke down utterly!

She felt his eyes fixed upon her face, but she dared not look at him. No; if she wished to preserve the smallest remnant of courage she must avoid the eyes she loved, as she would avoid a horrid sight.

Every scrap of pride that she ever possessed she must call together to defend her against her own weakness, and the battle which was harder than any other battle she had ever fought in her life, must be fought alone.

"I do care," she said, in a low voice; but very defiantly, "and I intend to marry him whether you or Lady Paget like it or not."

"You forget that I am your guardian, and can prevent it if I choose," his eyes flashing with anger.

She threw back her head, and laughed, mockingly.

"Excuse me; but the idea of your posing as my guardian was too much for me," she said, apologetically. "Did you remember it, years ago, when you took me surreptitiously to Windsor fair, and lent me pennies to play at knock-me-downs behind a shed?"

"I was a boy, and knew no better. Now," sitting up and twirling his moustache, "I am a man, and can do my best to keep you in order."

"Your very best won't go far," jumping up, "let me tell you; and when I'm a married woman," drawing herself up, "this very important guardianship will be at an end. And now to business. You may tell Lord Fitzmaur that I am willing to be his wife!"

Sir Oriel caught her by the hands, and looked earnestly into her eyes, which he fixed as with a spell of iron with his own.

"Is there no one on earth you like better?"

Her heart heaved as if it would burst from her bosom. Her lips parted, but no answer came. She tried to tear her hands away, but he held them fast, puzzling his brain meanwhile as to why on earth she had picked out Lord Fitzmaur from all the other men of her acquaintance.

"Raymond would suit you down to the ground. Why not have him?"

"Unfortunately he is in love with someone else."

"He never told me so," looking surprised.

"I'm certain I should know all about it."

"Blind! blind! blind!" thought Cora, wondering that he had never seen what was patent to so many. But she would not enlighten him.

If it had only been in her power she would have shielded him from everything in the shape of pain or sorrow—like a loving mother would fain protect her golden-haired darling from a breath of harm.

But one mortal cannot do that for another, and each must bear his own burden.

Cora's heart was heavy enough, though she

made her answers grow more cold and defiant as it felt softer. She was panting to get away, but Sir Oriel was intent on preventing the match if he could, and kept her there like a martyr tied to the stake.

After combating her fixed resolution by every possible argument, he at last wished that there should be no actual engagement for six months.

Cora was obliged to yield, for he had the undoubted power to stop the whole thing until she was of age, but she did so with apparent unwillingness, though her troubled heart jumped for joy with the thought of freedom for some time longer.

"I cannot think why you are in such a hurry to leave us," he said, reproachfully. "I thought you loved Wray better than any other spot on the globe!"

"Opinions change," and she shrugged her shoulders.

"The truth is, you are tired of all of us."

"I am tired of everything," she said, coldly.

"Not tired of your own brother?" And in an instant his arm was round her neck, his lips pressed softly to her cheek.

Her whole heart went out to him on a wave of tenderness, but outwardly she had the courage to seem cold and almost repellent.

"Don't, Oriel!" she said, quietly. "We must give up this sort of thing for ever."

"Much it will cost you," he said, sarcastically, infinitely wounded by her coldness. "Coming!" he called out the next instant, in answer to a voice which shouted,—

"Paget, where have you hidden yourself?" and hurried from the room.

Directly his back was turned, Cora threw herself down on the sofa, and cried as if she had never cried before. Oh! it was hard—hard—hard; but fight to the end she must!

CHAPTER XXX.

"WHEN you have quite done, I should like to speak a word to you?"

The request was made in a cold, bell-like voice; and Cora, starting up, saw Lady Gerda Staunton standing before her.

On her beautiful face there was an expression, which, if Sir Oriel could have seen it, would have given a death-blow to his love. It dried the tears on Cora's cheeks, and gave her back her self-possession in a moment.

She stood up, pale but very calm, her eyes looking haughty and defiant as she faced her enemy.

"May I ask what you want to speak to me about?"

"I saw you just now with Sir Oriel Paget," her voice trembling with passion; "and let me tell you that so long as he is engaged to me I will have no one come between us."

"I never heard before that a brother must give up a sister for such a reason!" her dainty head thrown back.

"Brother and sister!" cried Lady Gerda, fiercely, for once in her life roused out of all her lady-like refinement. "I'll insist upon an end being put to this rubbish at once. You are not his sister, please remember. It is only a foolishly sentimental idea, got up, no doubt, with a purpose—a purpose which is perfectly evident to all who come to the house."

Cora's cheeks turned deadly white, and her heart throbbed with such fierce anger that she was obliged to summon all her powers of restraint in order to control herself.

"Thank you, Lady Gerda, for showing me what you are capable of," she said, her voice vibrating with the intensity of her passion. "This is the first time I have ever been insulted in this house, and I promise you it shall be the last, or Lady Paget and her son shall hear of it."

Lady Gerda bit her lip, mortified at her own outbreak.

But Raymond Lovell had parted from her in coldness only half-an-hour before, and a subtle instinct told her that she had lost the

truest lover that woman ever had by her own madness.

Sir Oriol had disgusted her by his prolonged *l'le-d-lle* in the library just when she wanted to be smoothed down, and the climax had been put to everything by that fond embrace which she had caught sight of through the window.

In the girl before her she saw a dangerous rival, who was eager to take advantage of any slip on her part to separate her from Sir Oriol—a girl who had the advantage of being his playfellow from her childhood, who knew every atom and stone about the place, and was on the friendliest terms with all his pet animals—a girl who in her untamed grace and beauty had a special charm of her own, which she did not share with the other beautiful women of the world, and her heart rose up in fiery wrath against her.

"I haven't the slightest doubt that you would have the greatest pleasure in telling either of them anything you could get hold of against me," began Lady Gerda, icily, with outlying scorn; "but a girl who runs away from her home and is lost in London—who is found at two o'clock in the morning wandering about with a man who is afterwards forced by compassion to propose to her—"

There she stopped, half-frightened by the effect of her words.

Cora literally gasped for breath, such a tempest of rage came over her; and then, catching sight of Lord Fitzmaur strolling across the lawn with the young Baronet, she was out of the window and over the grass like a flash of lightning.

They stood still in surprise.

Lord Fitzmaur, stretching out his hand to her with a glad look in his eyes, said,—

"I have been looking for you everywhere!" whilst Sir Oriol's stiffness vanished like the wind at the sight of her face.

"Good heavens, what is it?" he exclaimed, in the utmost anxiety.

Cora took no notice of the Earl's extended hand, or of her cousin's question.

"Come at once to the library, please," she said, hoarsely, to Lord Fitzmaur.

"I may come too?" cried Sir Oriol, and they both followed her.

The Baronet's astonishment increased when he found Lady Gerda already there, standing like an offended queen, her graceful figure drawn to its full height.

"I have brought you here, Lord Fitzmaur, to hear what your sister has just told me," said Cora, her voice trembling with the passion that she only kept under with difficulty. "She says that I was wandering about the Embankment with you at two o'clock in the morning. Is this true?"

Lord Fitzmaur flushed to the roots of his hair, and stared indignantly at his sister.

"It is the vilest slander," he said, curtly.

Sir Oriol was about to speak, but Cora raised her hand to stop him, and even Lady Gerda's proud spirit quailed before the look in her brother's face.

"Lady Gerda also tells me that you proposed to me out of compassion," throwing back her head with the pride of a Paget; "and let me tell you, as that has once been said, nothing on earth shall ever induce me to be your wife, lest the slander being repeated, as it is sure to be, the few who are dear to me—her bosom heaved, her voice almost faltered—might begin to think it true!"

"You can't, you can't be so cruel!" cried Lord Fitzmaur, almost beside himself, as he tried to catch hold of her hands.

Sir Oriol crossed the room and placed himself between them, the sternest expression on his features that they had ever worn.

"I must trouble you to explain this," he said, very gravely. "If you insult my cousin you insult me, and I demand an explanation of these extraordinary statements."

"I am not accustomed to being ordered like a servant," Lady Gerda replied, too proud to yield, yet distracted by the thought that irretrievable ruin was before her if her marriage

with the Baronet were broken off. "Let Fitzmaur deny, if he can, that he met Miss Paget on the Embankment at two o'clock in the morning?"

The Earl looked as if he would willingly have killed his sister on the spot, whilst a deep dark red flushed his cheeks, but he felt that his tongue was tied by his loyalty to Cora, and he did not answer, except by a muttered oath.

"Whether Lord Fitzmaur deny it or not, I don't?" cried Cora, defiantly. "Oriol knows why I was there, but Lord Fitzmaur found me there by accident. I suppose we talked for five minutes before my proper guardian—my own cousin—came to bring me back to Lowndes-square!"

"Enough of this," broke in Sir Oriol, impatiently. "My cousin is accountable to no one but her guardian for her actions, and if I am satisfied with her conduct it is sufficient."

"You take her part against me!" flashed from Lady Gerda. "You are bound to stand by me, or your love isn't worth having."

"I should be a poor specimen of a man if I allowed my own womankind to be trodden under foot," he said, quietly.

"A cousin is nothing," scornfully.

"A cousin may be like a sister," putting his hand affectionately on Cora's shoulder.

Lady Gerda cast a glance of deadly hatred at the girl whom she knew to be her most dangerous rival.

Lord Fitzmaur had been pleading his cause in a vehement undertone, but Cora would not listen to him. He now broke out excitedly,—

"You give me no hope for the future?"

"None!" very coldly, with averted face.

"This is your doing, Gerda," and he turned fiercely on his sister. "You've ruined your own life, but you might have let mine alone. There was a chance for me here, but your cursed tongue has done for it."

"Oh, Fitzmaur, stop!" and she clasped her hands in agonised entreaty.

But her brother took no notice of her, as he flung out of the room in a rage, and an undefined dread came over her as to what he might do next.

With a pang, when just too late, she realised that the girl she hated might have been his salvation.

"Go after him—bring him back!" she cried.

"You don't know Fitzmaur as I do. He will be doing something terrible."

"How can you expect either of us to stir a step?" asked Sir Oriol, raising his eyebrows.

"You might say that he came back out of compassion!"

"But I will beg Miss Paget's pardon. I was in a passion; and do you never say anything in a passion that you are sorry for afterwards?"

"Often," with a smile; "but I don't know that the sorrow mends matters. You can go after your brother yourself, and beg him to do nothing in a hurry, but I can't; you have tied my hands!"

Lady Gerda passed quickly across the room, but Sir Oriol hurried to open the door for her.

"You don't care for me, Oriol, one bit," she said, reproachfully, in a low voice.

"Yes I do; but never attack a girl and expect me to desert her for your sake!"

"Would it have been the same with any girl? That's what I want to know!" looking at him steadfastly.

"I hope so. A man must be a coward who helps to trample on a woman," an expression of such manliness overspreading his good-looking face that it made it look thoroughly noble.

At that moment Lady Gerda felt more drawn to him than ever before.

"If I'm ever in any trouble I should like you to be by my side," she said, softly.

"Thanks; that is the highest compliment you could have paid me," and his eyes shone with pleasure.

He bent forward and kissed her smooth white cheek (having first ascertained that they were

screened from observation by the deep doorway), and was surprised to see how it crimsoned as she moved quickly away.

"And now for my poor little Cora," he said to himself, as he returned to the library with the intention of comforting and consoling her, but he could do no more harm in that direction, for Cora had disappeared.

Presently he sauntered on to the lawn with a cigar between his lips, wondering why women could not keep from quarrelling, and thanking his own particular star that Fitzmaur had taken himself off.

He was too young and too happy to see that the scene of that afternoon was the probable precursor of a tragedy. But the cloud was already on the horizon, and the storm was coming.

(To be continued.)

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

—30—

CHAPTER VI.—(continued.)

Mrs. FALCONER devoutly hoped that she might be wrong in her conjecture. Were such a story ever to reach Madeline's ears the girl's grief would be doubled. At least now she had the consolation of believing Gervase Talbot's love to have been all her own while he lived.

"Was there anyone likely to benefit by Mr. Talbot's death?" she asked, presently.

"No—I think not," said Madeline. "My poor boy was not rich, and Inglefield Park—left to him by his uncle a year or two ago—is declared to be worth little or nothing. His cousin Percy lives there now, taking charge of the place, he says, until some news of Gervase transpires. If he never comes back the Park will belong to Mr. Dennison, I suppose, since Gervase has no other relations."

"Who is this Mr. Dennison, and what is he like?"

"He is a barrister, poor, I believe, and not very popular at Inglefield. I have never liked him; there is something repellent about him which I can't explain—something sinister. He quarrelled with Gervase when the will was read; he was so angry at being disinherited for some fault, and for a time they were ill-friends. A reconciliation took place in time, however, later on between them—at least so Percy Dennison told me when he came to break the news of Gervase's disappearance to me, and the old cordial relations were renewed and continued to—the end. It was Percy who set the inquiries on foot."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Falconer, quietly.

"He was the only one then to take action in the matter; the inquiries were confined to Mr. Dennison?"

"Yes. Gervase had no one else related to him, and I was not in a position to do anything—to try to solve his fate."

"Doubtless Mr. Dennison has done all in his power to pierce the mystery surrounding his cousin's strange disappearance," continued Mrs. Falconer. "At the same time, it might console you, Madeline, were some efforts in that direction made by ourselves, irrespective of his. I am about to suggest securing the services of a clever detective, one well up in his profession. He will endeavour to ascertain Mr. Talbot's fate, to trace his movements on that eventful night—at my expense."

Madeline fell on her knees by the sofa with a little cry.

"It is what I have longed for," she sobbed. "I was saving up my salary until I could employ someone to trace him for me without Percy Dennison's knowledge. Oh, how can I ever thank you!"

The suggestion furnished her with fresh hope and courage, while doubling her gratitude towards her employer, who lost no time in putting her plan into execution.

Soon after that Mrs. Falconer felt equal to giving a fashionable five o'clock tea. Most of

the guests had arrived, and Madeline was pouring out tea at a side-table when a tall man with light steely-blue eyes, fair hair and moustache entered the pretty flower-decorated drawing-room.

Horace Fielding, the reigning beauty's only brother, had but recently returned from a tour in Africa. He belonged to no profession, he had but few distinctive characteristics. He was as thorough a worldling as his sister, Gladys, going beyond her even in that refined heartless sensualism, peculiar to the nineteenth century, with its hyper-refinement and surface culture.

He honoured Madeline with a long stare expressive of admiration, as he made his way towards Mrs. Falconer.

"Who is that young lady over there?" he asked, as soon as he could decently put the question.

"She is my companion—Miss Vernon," replied the widow, with an amused smile.

Horace Fielding had never evinced any interest in Madeline's predecessors.

"She is very lovely!" he continued, glancing across at Madeline in her long, sombre, mourning robes, relieved at throat and wrists by creamy ruffles.

"She is a nice girl," said Mrs. Falconer, "and she suits me very well. How many lions did you shoot out in Africa, pray?"

"Two only. I have brought the skin of one home for you if you will accept it."

"Indeed, I am greatly favoured."

"Have I ever tried to conceal my strong predilection for you?" he asked, laughingly, "a predilection the more to be wondered at, since I believe you to entertain a very unflattering opinion of me, Mrs. Falconer."

"You are not to be trusted," was the placid reply. "Like Mark Twain, you have succeeded in killing your conscience."

He only laughed.

"Conscience, my dear lady! Why, I am a poor man. I can't afford to indulge in such an expensive luxury," he said, lightly. "I wish you would introduce me to Miss Vernon. She must be something new in companions. Are they not, as a rule, cross and elderly?"

"The result of man's selfishness in not coming forward to marry and preserve them from such a fate," retorted Mrs. Falconer, complying with his request, confident that it was out of his power to work Madeline any harm. Was she not shielded by her love for Gervase Talbot?

Horace Fielding hung around the girl, and haunted the vicinity of the tea-table after being introduced to her, handing cups of tea, bringing others to be refilled, and abating her duties in a manner that she did not approve of.

She disliked this tall, fair man, with the light, steely-grey eyes, and smooth, well-modulated voice. Her woman's wit enabled her to discern the unprincipled sensualist and libertine beneath that refined attractive exterior. Madeline's rare pale beauty, the very coldness with which she received his compliments and attentions, served to increase and deepen his interest in her. She pleased and piqued him at the same time.

"You are very cruel to me, Miss Vernon," he said, pathetically. "I have devoted myself to you body and soul for the last half-hour, and you reward me with a cup of sugarless tea."

"Really! The omission would not have occurred but for your conversation, which distracted my attention from what I was doing," she replied, frankly, while helping him to sugar.

"Am I to accept that in a complimentary sense, or the reverse?"

"I mean that it is impossible to work and talk at the same time," said Madeline, unrelentingly.

"If you had sweetened that tea with so much as one kind word I should have failed to notice its sugarless condition," he rejoined, with a glance of bold, open admiration.

Surely he might flirt to any extent with a girl who was only a companion?

"I don't understand you," she said, haughtily, moving away from the tea-table, and joining a group of ladies, discussing church work.

She enconced herself so cleverly behind one ponderous matron that Horace Fielding, manoeuvre as he might, failed to exchange another word with her that afternoon.

Yet she was destined to see a great deal more of him against her will. He called frequently; and wherever she went with Mrs. Falconer he seemed to be present, ready to bestow unwelcome attentions upon her.

Madeline's fresh beauty, with which was blended a proud purity, an old-world grace and simplicity, attracted him, although no idea of paying serious court to a penniless girl in a dependent position ever crossed his mind.

Mrs. Falconer returned one afternoon from making a call, unaccompanied by Madeline, in a state of repressed excitement.

"My dear child," she began, as soon as they were alone, "such a strange thing has happened. I have met your one surviving relative at Lady Mountford's this afternoon."

"Uncle Joshua?"

"Yes, Uncle Joshua. He is immensely rich, and a bachelor. You will be an heiress yet, Madeline!"

CHAPTER VII.

"BUT I thought that he, my uncle, was dead?" exclaimed Madeline, in all astonishment.

"On the contrary, he is very much alive," said Mrs. Falconer, laughing. "A more disagreeable, pugnacious old gentleman it would be hard to find. He made a large fortune in America, it appears, by successful trading. He only returned to England about six months ago, and he has not attempted to communicate with his family, or to ascertain what members of it still survive. Being well born and well-educated, he immediately resumed his old position here in society. What a fortunate thing for you, Madeline, that I chanced to meet him!"

"How did you become aware of our affinity?" asked the girl eagerly.

"Upon being introduced, your uncle sat down beside me, and we drifted into conversation," continued Mrs. Falconer. "The similarity in name did not impress me at first; but when he alluded to his prolonged absence from his native land, and the complete isolation from his own kindred—the result of a quarrel—I thought of what you had told me, and, like *Oliver Twist*, I 'asked for more.' When we compared notes, and discussed Christian names, and localities, I knew that he could be no other than your uncle, Madeline."

"Did you tell him about me?"

"Yes. I ventured to inform Mr. Joshua Vernon of his brother's death, which had left you, his niece, totally unprovided for. I described your position as my companion to him."

"And what did he say?"

"Well, at first he was by no means pleased. I believe he would have no objection to provide for you, child, only his perverse nature, which prompts him to act in direct opposition to any suggestion emanating from another, would rebel at the idea of being expected to adopt you. Leave him to himself, however, and he will do it."

"I do not wish him to provide for me," said Madeline, proudly. "I would far rather remain with you, dear Mrs. Falconer, since he is so odd."

"It is not right that you should earn your own living when your only relative is so wealthy," was the reply. "I am inclined to like Mr. Vernon, in spite of his odd ways, and I think I have discovered how he is to be

managed. He argued every point with me till I felt wicked. He said he was too much engaged at present to make his niece's acquaintance. I replied that was rather fortunate, since I proposed leaving town in a few days, taking you with me. Then he veered round, and expressed his intention of calling here to-morrow. I am looking forward very hopefully to this visit, on which your future may greatly depend."

When the footman announced Mr. Joshua Vernon on the following day, Mrs. Falconer was by herself in the drawing-room, working an elaborate mantel-border in crewels.

"I think you had better not be present when your uncle calls, Madeline," she had said previously to her young companion. "Leave him to me for the first half-hour; only be in readiness to come down when I send for you."

Madeline acquiesced willingly enough in this arrangement. Since Gervase Talbot's disappearance she had ceased to take a keen interest in any other incidents bearing directly upon her own life.

No change of fortune, however propitious, could still the constant pain, the cruel suspense occasioned by his absence, and give her lasting relief.

She sat upstairs in her room with idly clasped hands, wondering a little what her father's brother could be like personally, yet feeling supremely indifferent as to the result of his interview with Mrs. Falconer.

Joshua Vernon, a short, stout old gentleman, with a red, choleric face and very white hair, bestowed a formal bow upon the lady he had come to make terms with, and then proceeded at once, in his hasty pugnacious fashion, to business.

"I presume, madam, that you consider me in duty bound to make some provision for this niece of mine, at present in your employ?" he began, each white hair standing erect and bristling with contradictoriness. "At least I inferred as much from our conversation of yesterday?"

"Pray be seated, Mr. Vernon," said the widow, in her low, pleasant voice. "Since then I have had time to think the matter over thoroughly. Perhaps, being somewhat impulsive, I allowed my liking for your niece to influence me unduly in urging her claim upon you. I am quite willing to admit now that you are not under any obligation to provide for her. She is young and well-educated, quite able to earn her own living."

Joshua Vernon gave an astonished grunt; this was not all what he had reckoned on.

"I have not encouraged Madeline in the idea that you intend doing anything for her," Mrs. Falconer went on. "She is very happy here as my companion, and you cannot reasonably be expected to maintain her."

"Humph! I trust, madam, that I am in a position to assist the only remaining member of my family if I think proper to do so," he said, irritably. "As you remarked just now, I am not compelled to provide my brother's child with a home. Nevertheless, I intend doing so, in order to rescue her from a dependent position, although I detest girls, and never expected to be pestered with any of them about me. Pity she's too old to be sent to school again!"

Joshua Vernon had come anticipating expostulations, arguments, entreaties, and a niece only too ready and willing to throw herself into his reluctant arms. He found, instead, a lady by no means anxious to press that niece's claims, while the girl herself was nowhere to be seen.

Mrs. Falconer's clever policy was fast producing the desired result. His contradictory nature, upon being humoured, took another turn.

Joshua Vernon hated anyone to agree with him. He was miserable if people entered into a conspiracy not to contradict him, to give him his way without opposition. Mrs. Falconer's tone was so unexpected that it induced him to adopt his niece's cause.

"It is very generous on your part," said the

widow, with a quiet smile, "but really I fail to see why you should inconvenience yourself, and accept so much responsibility in order to benefit Madeline. She is a good girl, as girls go, and at present she has no unreasonable expectations to unsettle her. Why not allow her to remain with me? She has a fair share of change and society as my companion, and what more can a girl possibly want?"

"A home of her own, madam!" retorted Joshua Vernon, waxing hot as the other grew cool. "Until now no Vernon has ever occupied a dependent position. Had I been aware of my niece's circumstances earlier in the day I should have taken measures to improve them. As it is, for the credit of the family, her maintenance will devolve upon me until such time as she marries, which I sincerely hope she will do at an early date."

"It is too amusing," thought Mrs. Falconer, deftly sorting her many-coloured silks. "Like the Irishman's pig, you have only to drive him in one direction when you want him to take another, and the thing is done!"

"My niece's services are of value to her, and doubtless underpaid," reflected Joshua Vernon, sitting opposite to the calm, elegant, high-bred woman, with his head a little on one side, a single eyeglass screwed into his small, fiery, grey eye. "Mrs. Falconer doesn't wish to be at the trouble and expense of engaging another companion. I can read her easily enough, but I am not to be turned from my purpose by a few soft words. Oh, dear, no! She would like to retain my niece, and that is precisely what she shall not do."

"I expected to see my niece," he said, aloud. "I hope she is not from home?"

"Oh, dear, no," was the reply, betokening but languid interest. "She is upstairs, I believe, altering a dress for me. I will send for her—if you really wish to see her."

Really wish to see her! The eyeglass became quite ferocious. "Why, why, confound it, madam! Did I not come here to-day for that purpose alone? And I understood that Madeline was your companion, not your lady's maid!"

"Miss Vernon is my companion, but, sometimes, when my maid is unusually busy, she is kind enough to assist her," explained Mrs. Falconer.

"Indeed; well, she will have a maid of her own very shortly. I intend to take a small house in Mayfair, and instal my niece in it as mistress." He had come to Mrs. Falconer's without any definite intentions respecting Madeline. The house in Mayfair was an after-thought. "Perhaps you will allow your servant to inform her that I am here?"

"Certainly!"

Mrs. Falconer rang the bell, and gave the footman his instructions.

"I shall be very sorry to lose Miss Vernon," she added, petulantly, "just as she has grown accustomed to my ways, and almost indispensable to me!"

"I dare say you will, madam; I dare say you will," growled Joshua Vernon, inwardly complimenting himself upon his own astuteness in reading her selfish motives. "Fortunately, companions are plentiful, and my niece's prospects render it unnecessary for her to fulfil such duties any longer."

"Come and give me a kiss, my dear!" he said, after subjecting Madeline to a severe scrutiny, as she glided timidly into the room. "You were but a child when I last saw you. You resemble your father—my eldest brother. Don't be afraid of me. I mean to act kindly to you. I should not have quarrelled with your father if he had been less confoundedly dogmatic, and fond of having his own way in everything. I never knew a man so fond of contradicting other people. It's a bad habit—a very bad habit; but since he's dead and gone, why, I forgive him. To prove that my forgiveness is genuine I'm going to adopt you. This lady tells me that you have been happy here with her?"

"Very happy, indeed, Uncle Joshua," said Madeline, gratefully.

"Well, you ought to be quite as happy with me, and so you will. Now go and put on your things at once. From henceforth you belong to me, Madeline. I'm staying at an hotel now, but we'll begin our house-hunting to-morrow, my dear, to-morrow, and you shall be my housekeeper."

"But, Uncle Joshua," expostulated the girl gently, "while sensible of your kindness, I cannot leave Mrs. Falconer at a moment's notice. She has been, she is, such a real friend to me that I should be ungrateful were I to desert her in this summary fashion."

"Pray do not leave me companionless, Mr. Vernon," said the widow, laughingly. "or I shall regret ever having met you. Let me have Madeline for just one week longer—as a visitor. Then I will give her up to you, without any protest. I hope you will consent to dine with us to-night, while Madeline will, of course, be at liberty to go house-hunting with you to-morrow."

Joshua Vernon actually assented to this suggestion. His niece's beauty, her gentle, pleasing manner, had softened the old man, and predisposed him in her favour.

Yes, he was glad already—by Jove he was!—that he had encountered Madeline and got the best of that artful woman, Mrs. Falconer, a selfish, designing creature, who would have stood in the girl's light had it been possible.

Their visitor gone, Mrs. Falconer proceeded to describe her method in dealing with him, to Madeline's mingled amusement and dismay.

"He is very hasty and choleric," said the latter, dubiously. "I don't know how we shall get on together. He looks as if he could box my ears were I ever to contradict him. You have done all this to advance my interests, yet I would far rather have remained with you."

"Your uncle will improve upon acquaintance," replied the other, confidently. "You will learn to like him, in spite of his peculiarities. Sorry as I shall be to lose you, I am anxious to see you well provided for, child. Now you will have a warm, safe nest of your own!"

Joshua Vernon dined with the two ladies that night, triumphantly proving them to be in the wrong whenever they ventured upon an opinion.

The next day he commenced house-hunting with his accustomed energy, Mrs. Falconer being pressed into the service.

A bijou residence in Mayfair was selected as his future residence and that of Madeline. He consulted his niece's taste when the furnishing of it was in question, merely stipulating that it should not be sufficiently æsthetic to preclude all comfort.

"I hate straight-backed chairs, and drawing-rooms crammed full of crockery that ought to be in the kitchen," he remarked, vigorously. "Do as you like respecting your own rooms, little girl, but let mine be rationally furnished, since I am too old to adapt myself to the fashion of the day."

As Mrs. Falconer had predicted, Joshua Vernon improved upon acquaintance. Madeline began to experience something like affection for the eccentric, kind-hearted old man. Little as she was influenced by sordid considerations she could but feel the happier for being thus installed in a luxurious home of her own.

"Uncle Joshua, you are doing your best to spoil me with so much indulgence," she protested, when, on taking possession of her new home, he handed her the keys with a funny little formal speech that made her laugh, while something in it, she knew not what, brought the unbidden tears to her eyes. "I hope I shall not abuse so much authority. I will certainly do my utmost to please and satisfy you. We are such a lonely pair," she continued, "that we ought to care a great deal for each other."

"Sow shall," replied Uncle Joshua, briskly. "I knew that you would suit me, child, from the first moment I saw you, which was fortu-

nate, considering that I had decided to take you away from Mrs. Falconer, whatever you might be like in person or disposition, as soon as I discovered how anxious she was to retain you. She is a nice woman, a very nice woman, but selfish, selfish, like the rest of us when it comes to the point!"

And he retained this opinion of the charming, graceful widow to his dying day.

Joshua Vernon had, of course, been made aware of Gervase Talbot's strange disappearance, and its effect upon Madeline. The story, as related by Mrs. Falconer, interested him greatly.

Although Gervase was personally unknown to him yet, as Madeline's lover, his possible fate aroused the old man's liveliest sympathy. He was secretly vexed to think that Mrs. Falconer had been first in the field with regard to the detectives employed to trace Gervase. This did not prevent him, however, from securing the ablest detective skill himself, and offering a large reward for any information bearing upon the artist's disappearance.

Madeline had at least the satisfaction of knowing that no stone had been left unturned in the attempt to solve the missing man's fate. Yet the double search, carefully conducted as it was, proved unavailing. No facts were elicited.

Had Gervase Talbot melted into space that night by the river-side he could not have vanished more completely, leaving no trace behind, not so much as the ghost of a "clue."

To Horace Fielding, always more or less impetuous, and over head and ears in debt, Madeline Vernon's adoption by her wealthy uncle came as a very welcome piece of news. He had long looked forward to recruiting his shattered fortunes, the result of extravagance, by means of a marriage with an heiress. He could afford now to woo Madeline in earnest, not merely in order to gratify a passion strong as it was selfish.

Madeline's heiress ship would render her a desirable wife. To marry the girl he loved, while her ample fortune went to swell his finances, would be a consummation scarcely capable of being improved upon.

She could not really dislike him, he reflected. It would be unjust to ascribe such bad taste to such a charming girl. Her coldness and hauteur were probably assumed to hide a warmer feeling. And, even if the dislike were genuine on her part, had he not sufficient individuality, volition, and knowledge of the female character to overcome it by degrees, and win Madeline's love?

"I wonder how much the old man is worth!" he mused, on his way home from Mrs. Falconer's, where he had learnt the details concerning Madeline's fortune. "I really ought not to let myself go under forty thousand—I should be cheap at that!"

Which shows what varying estimates men and women may arrive at in reference to their own value.

As frequently as possible Horace Fielding affected Joshua Vernon's society. He wanted to ingratiate himself with the old man, to win his good opinion. To this end he hampered his weak points and foibles, while his own extensive knowledge of America—whither he had once repaired, according to the uncharitable, to escape his creditors and seek peaceful oblivion—served as a link, a common sympathy, between the two men.

Madeline noted, with regret, her uncle's increasing partiality for Horace Fielding, whom, in her secret heart, she both disliked and despised. It was not all progress for him, though. If he advanced one step in Joshua Vernon's good graces, he fell back two in those of his niece.

CHAPTER VIII.

TAKING up the paper one morning Madeline's eyes were attracted by a paragraph headed "Discovery of Stone at Ingfield

Park." She read it through with breathless interest, a dull pain at her heart the while.

The present owner, Mr. Percy Dennison, the paper went on to say, had long been of opinion that a valuable stone quarry existed beneath the proverbially poor, unproductive soil of Inglesfield Park. This opinion had been endorsed by a practical man acquainted with the subject. He had then commenced operations with the most satisfactory results. The stone was discovered not far below the surface, and it appeared to extend for some considerable distance. It was of a kind much in request for public and other buildings—strong, handsome, durable. Mr. Dennison was to be congratulated upon such a find, which must need increase the value of his estate to an enormous extent, especially if the vein proved to be a large one. He was in a position now to obtain something beyond bread from a stone, and to rebuild Inglesfield House, a very dilapidated mansion according to all accounts, at small expense.

The paper slipped from Madeline's hand as she sat there thinking intently over what she had just read, trying to connect it with Gervase Talbot's fate.

Had Percy Dennison, she wondered, anticipated the discovery of this stone quarry, which was to make him a wealthy man, previous to Gerald's disappearance, or had the idea of its existence only dawned upon him later on? If she could but know. As it was her vague suspicions, her dislike for Percy Dennison, were augmented by this news. Instead of succeeding to a worthless property, Gervase had had a fortune in his grasp without being aware of it, however. His cousin, as heir-presumptive, with some inkling of the truth, would naturally regard Gervase as a man much to be envied. Had he gone beyond this in attempting to dispose of him that Inglesfield Park might change owners? Was Percy Dennison capable of committing a crime in order to gain his own ends?

Madeline could not answer this torturing question. She took Uncle Joshua and Mrs. Falconer into her confidence, however, and the irascible, impulsive old gentleman announced his intention of going down to Inglesfield as his niece's representative; ostensibly to inquire if any tidings of Gervase Talbot had been elicited, in reality to make Percy Dennison's acquaintance and diagnose his character, in so far as he was able.

Percy Dennison received his unexpected visitor very affably. He regretted to say that he was still quite in the dark respecting his cousin's fate, although he had spared no pains in the endeavour to ascertain it.

Meanwhile, the management of the estate, and the recently discovered stone quarry, devolved upon him, as a trust which he should be only too glad to renounce in the event of Gervase Talbot's reappearance.

"Assuming Mr. Talbot to be dead, the property becomes yours, I believe?" said Uncle Joshua, eyeing the barrister keenly.

"Let us hope the contingency is a very remote one," rejoined Percy, deprecatingly. "In the absence of any definite tidings, any actual proof of his death, I should not feel justified in assuming the ownership, not at least until several years had elapsed. Until then I shall regard the estate and its revenues as his, to be accounted for should he return. I am only a *locum tenens*!"

"All very fine," reflected Uncle Joshua, when in the train on his way home; "yet, in spite of your smooth, plausible manner, Mr. Dennison, I neither like nor trust you. The handling of Gervase Talbot's gold is a pleasant and more remunerative task for you than the study of briefs at three or four guineas a piece. I believe you to be capable of any dirty work when money is in question. How to get at you, that is the thing—to reach you through your polite reserve. You wear an armour of chain mail, very pliant and flexible, but too close-fitting to admit of a sharp thrust reaching you through it. I would

freely give a thousand pounds to have this mystery cleared up, since it darkens my little girl's life, and poisons all her happiness. What the deuce did she want to fall in love with that painter fellow for, I wonder?"

Someone else read of that discovery at Inglesfield with quickened pulse.

Gladys Fielding, now Lady Roscoe, felt a curious blending of pain and regret thrill through her on becoming aware of the source of wealth Gervase Talbot would have enjoyed but for his strange, abrupt disappearance.

If things had only fallen out differently, if that discovery had only taken place earlier in the day, she would have consented to forego a title, and become the wife of the man she loved, thus altering the tenor of his life, and perhaps averting such a fate as the one that had befallen him.

Now he was lost to her, and to the good fortune that had come too late to benefit either of them. As long as she lived Gladys would never cease to love or regret Gervase Talbot. He had made a deep impression upon her, selfish and worldly as she was.

In all probability he was dead, the victim of some remorseless crime, she reflected miserably, and, even if he were to return now, it would only be to shower reproaches upon her for having proved so faithless to him. The "might have been" was exceeding bitter to the proud, beautiful woman just then. One thing troubled her especially. She had never felt quite certain of Gervase Talbot's love.

Many a time during their acquaintance he had suffered a relapse into moodiness and gloom, as if his heart were elsewhere, in spite of the mad infatuation that swayed him, and rendered him for the time being her slave. Some chance word, some bitter speech savouring of regret or self-reproach, had frequently caused her to doubt her actual supremacy over him, to wonder if a more favoured woman, one whom he had previously loved, still occupied his thoughts and prevented him from becoming wholly hers.

He might be dead, yet it would have consoled her immensely to know that she, and she alone, had held the first place in his heart.

Gladys, Lady Roscoe, fulfilled Percy Dennison's prophecy by making inquiries about the picture for which she herself had sat in the character of Helen. Gervase Talbot had declared he would never sell it. Now that he had vanished so mysteriously she was desirous of becoming its possessor; it seemed to belong exclusively to her and to him.

Percy Dennison graciously allowed her to purchase it for a large sum of money, which went into his own pocket.

Gladys had the picture hung in her private sitting-room. It gave rise to painful memories, and pain to a woman of her calibre was, as a rule, a thing to be shunned and avoided; yet, for the artist's sake, his work occupied the place of honour, where her eyes could rest upon it twenty times a day.

Lady Roscoe was not a very happy being, although the highest summit of her ambition had been realised. A sense of something wanting in her life, of some higher, purer delight and ineffable tenderness just missed haunted her perpetually.

Lord Roscoe, too, was not the most desirable of husbands from a domestic point of view. His temper was uncertain, and he loved to exercise a kind of petty tyranny over his beautiful young wife, of whom he was inordinately jealous; to fetter and curb her actions, interfere with her engagements, and limit her expenditure in a manner that tried her patience sorely.

She strove, in her grand, imperious queenly fashion, to ignore his exigencies, to assert her own individuality, and live her own life as much as possible independent of him.

Yet Lord Roscoe was not easily to be set down. He stung and irritated her like a gad-fly; he buzzed around her with persistent, unwelcome attentions and admonitions, while

she could not enjoy the satisfaction of crushing him, as she would have done the gad-fly.

Lady Roscoe had her box at the opera, her town and country house, her splendid equipage, and elaborate toilettes, that helped to set the fashion for less distinguished people. The famous Roscoe diamonds gleamed and sparkled upon her white neck and arms on state occasions, giving rise to a terrible amount of feminine envy.

She was well received in the best and most exclusive circles, yet there was an absence of love and tenderness in her life, an aching void which wealth, and rank, and gratified ambition could never fill.

Once, shortly after that discovery at Inglesfield Park, as she emerged from a large millinery establishment in Regent-street, and was about to enter her carriage, she caught sight of a passing face in the crowd.

Was it a dream-face, a phantom belonging to that dead and beautiful past, bringing it swiftly back to her memory? She could not tell. She only knew that changed, worn, haggard as they were the features resembled those of Gervase Talbot. The look of reproach in the large sunken eyes, as they met hers in silent recognition for a brief second, seemed fairly to scorch her. Then, as swiftly as it had dawned upon her, the face vanished amidst the throng.

To the astonishment of her superb coachman and footman, Lady Roscoe went hurriedly down the crowded street for a few yards, as if in search of something or some one. Then, recognizing the futility of the attempt to discover the owner of that face, she retraced her steps, entered her carriage, and gave the word "Home!" She refused to see any callers that day, and absolved herself from a dinner-party to which she had been invited on the score of a bad headache.

Meanwhile Madeline Vernon, in addition to the sorrow which her lover's disappearance had entailed upon her, was encountering fresh trouble and perplexity in connection with Horace Fielding.

That gentleman, although he did not exactly persecute her with his attentions, yet contrived to make them sufficiently obvious. In a thousand different ways he urged his suit delicately upon her, refusing to recognise various symptoms of dislike and disapproval, which she did not fail to manifest.

Joshua Vernon's friendly attitude tended to encourage the young man in his wooing—to predict a favourable termination to it. Madeline would not surely venture to cross her uncle's wishes when it came to the point, however much they might differ from her own, seeing that her future prospects were so entirely dependent upon him! Accordingly, Horace Fielding played up to Uncle Joshua, and gained a yet firmer hold on his favour, while sedulously courting Madeline.

She regarded the situation with growing alarm and uneasiness. Uncle Joshua was always singing Horace Fielding's praises, while remaining obstinately blind to his faults.

"He's a shrewd, clever fellow, well-bred too, with plenty of *nous*, not one of those limp, long-legged creatures who hang around drawing-room doors, and lean up against walls at parties, looking as if they had been boned—all ready for cooking," he remarked, in answer to some speech of Madeline's. "I can't imagine why you dislike him, my dear, a well-set-up, handsome man, with good connections and extensive knowledge of the world. What if he has been somewhat wild and extravagant. I've heard that those men when they *range* themselves makes the best of husbands. Nothing dishonourable has ever been brought against him, and he stands high in my estimation. I don't wish to be unkind, Madeline, but the sooner you try to forget Mr. Talbot the better. He must not be allowed to spoil your life, child—to prevent you from loving again, and more happily this time, I trust."

Madeline made no reply to the speech. She

could not open her uncle's eyes to Horace Fielding's true character, as she herself divined it, and she hated to vex or cross him in any way. Until such time as he requested her to marry Fielding she would be patient. Then she knew well what her answer must be.

Desirous of advancing his cause and enlisting fresh aid, Horace Fielding had persuaded his sister to take Madeline up, and cultivate her society. Without feeling strongly attracted towards the brilliant, imperious, beautiful woman, Madeline thought Lady Roscoe a decided improvement upon her brother, and to some extent reciprocated the friendly overtures made.

"What a splendid picture!" she exclaimed, admiringly, when, admitted for the first time to her ladyship's private sitting-room, a privileged visitor, her eyes rested upon Gervase Talbot's masterpiece. "The colouring is so rich and deep, the face so perfect! Why, Lady Roscoe," glancing swiftly at her, "Helen's lovely face and yours are identical. The artist has caught your habitual expression in the happiest manner!"

Gladys smiled languidly.

"There is a history connected with that picture," she replied. "The artist was in despair, failing to discover a model that approached his ideal of Helen of Troy. I consented—at his urgent request—to give him three sittings, since he was pleased to approve of my face. When finished he expressed his intention of keeping the picture, which he regarded as his masterpiece, instead of selling it. After his disappearance—he vanished in a most mysterious manner—I traced the 'Helen,' and purchased it for the sake of Auld Lang Syne."

"And the artist's name?" cried Madeline, breathlessly.

"Was Gervase Talbot."

"I knew it," said the girl, a little flush born of excitement rising to the pure pale face. "At least, I thought I could recognise his style—it is so familiar to me!"

"You were acquainted with Mr. Talbot, then?" remarked Gladys, her tone evincing some surprise.

"We were more than acquaintances," said Madeline, quietly. "At the time of his disappearance Mr. Talbot and I were engaged to be married."

Woman of the world as she was, skilled in the art of concealing her emotions, Gladys could not suppress a start as these words fell upon her ear.

Here had been but a partial triumph then, after all, and she could not tell to what extent she had succeeded in shaking Gervase Talbot's allegiance to his fiancée. She felt almost inclined to hate this girl who had won his first love, who had actually been betrothed to him. Yet she, Gladys, had certainly carried him off his balance and evoked a fierce, strong, passionate attachment. Those words of his, "You have cost me far more than you are aware of," recurred to her now. Had he spoken them in allusion to Madeline Vernon and his engagement?

"How sad for you?" she said, calmly, after a brief pause. "And you have not the least idea what became of your lover?"

Madeline shook her head.

"None whatever. There are times when I think, I fear, he must have been murdered. I received a letter from him only a week previous to his disappearance, and there was no allusion in it to any trouble or debt oppressing him. He wrote in his usual style. It is a profound mystery."

Evidently she suspected nothing. Her faith in the missing man was unshaken. Gladys decided to let it remain so. She was never purposely cruel, save when her own interests were at stake. Since Gervase Talbot was dead, Madeline's love for him mattered little. That face which had startled her so in Regent-street could have been only a chance likeness, her own conscience supplying the reproachful look in the eyes.

"He was very dear to you?" she said, interrogatively.

"So dear," rejoined Madeline, "that I shall remain faithful to his memory as long as I live!"

In spite of his sister's warning to proceed cautiously and with tact in the attempt to win Madeline, Horace Fielding was becoming very impatient. He thought there had been enough and too much of indefinite courtship, with creditors growing clamorous and debts accumulating every day; and he secretly determined to put his fate to the test at the earliest opportunity.

That took the shape of Mrs. Cimabue Brown's ball. Joshua Vernon and his niece were among those present, Madeline looking exquisitely fair and graceful in clouds of white tulle, with 'wreathed pearls' confining her soft, dark hair, and a bunch of snowy roses clustering amidst the lace upon her bosom.

"She was very lovely!" Horace Fielding told himself, with a satisfied air. "A deuced fine girl!" whom he had set his heart upon marrying, since the lovely face would have a golden frame.

With Madeline as his wife the wheels of life would revolve smoothly again. Old Vernon couldn't go on living for ever; and as to that painter-fellow, to whom she had once been engaged, surely he, Horace Fielding, could find means to efface his image from her memory, and grave his own there instead!

Madeline could not well avoid giving him one dance, since he pleaded so hard, and strove to make the most of it; yet he found it uphill work, talking soft nonsense to her. Her wonted ready repartee had failed her for once, and she was both too proud and too gentle to indulge in flirtation, to trifle with his or any other man's heart.

Their dance over, he led her, a somewhat unwilling companion, into the conservatory, radiant with soft, tempered light, fairy lamps gleaming here and there amidst the foliage.

"Madeline," he said gently, seating himself beside her. "I have a confession to make. I love you, and I want you to give yourself to me—to become my wife!"

CHAPTER IX.

MADLINE started perceptibly. Her lips took a firmer curve.

"Mr. Fielding," she replied, without any hesitation. "What you ask for is impossible. I do not care for you in that way, and there are other reasons also. We can never be more to each other than we are at present."

His brow lowered at this frank repulse, yet he evinced no other sign of defeat or discomfiture.

"I could make you happy, Madeline. I could teach you to love me!" he persisted. "Will you tell me what those other reasons consist of?"

"You have doubtless heard of my engagement to Mr. Talbot?" said Madeline, striving to speak calmly.

"Yes! but he has been dead some time, or at least that is the general opinion. You cannot mean to devote yourself to a memory, to close your heart against all love but his?" urged Horace Fielding. "Only give me a little hope, and I will not be exigent in my demands."

"Were I to do so I should only be deceiving you!" was the reply. "Dead or alive, Gervase Talbot will remain my lover. No one else can take his place. To be candid, Mr. Fielding, my decision with regard to him does not affect you. Had I failed to meet Gervase Talbot I should still have refused to become your wife."

Horace Fielding's light blue eyes had a steely gleam in them. Thwarted love and the prospect of losing Madeline's fortune were playing the deuce with his temper.

"You are, indeed, candid!" he exclaimed,

with a bitter laugh. "Well, that which is hard to win is always more valued when won, and I shall not despair."

"Why put yourself to needless pain? I shall never have any other answer to give you. I am not one lightly to change my mind, or to love more than once."

"I cannot accept your answer as final," said Horace Fielding, doggedly. "Sooner or later love like mine must command love in response. I can wait, Madeline, and I am a persistent wooer. I allow no obstacles to discourage me!"

"In other words, you intend to continue this unmanly persecution, notwithstanding my absolute refusal to entertain your proposal of marriage," said the girl, proudly and indignantly. "It will not tend to increase my liking for you, which was never at any time very strong!"

"I could not be guilty of persecuting you," he rejoined; "yet to abandon all hope of eventually inducing you to become my wife is—quite as impossible. You will not always entertain such an unfavourable opinion of me. You must, you will, in time learn to appreciate the love I am so eager to lavish upon you."

"I can only repeat that your hopes are groundless," said Madeline, haughtily. "I wish to return to the ball-room!"

"Your uncle, Mr. Vernon, is not averse to my suit," he replied, disregarding her request. "Indeed, he is willing to further it. Are you prepared—in addition to your cruelty to me—to cut me in direct opposition to his express wishes?"

"You have done your best to come between us, I know," she exclaimed, a scornful light in her dark eyes, "to estrange me from my friend and benefactor, who, were he acquainted with your true character, would be the first to ignore you. You have deceived him, but you cannot deceive me, Mr. Fielding. Sooner than marry you I would incur my uncle's anger, and the loss of all my present advantages, owing to him."

"What do you know to prejudice you so strongly against me?"

"The rumours I have heard respecting your past life, your present attitude and veiled threat, are more than enough. If you do not instantly take me back to the drawing-room, I will return by myself!"

"I swear you shall be my wife sooner or later. I love you too well to lose you," said Horace Fielding vehemently, beneath his breath, as he tendered his arm, which Madeline dropped as soon as she found herself by her uncle again.

His double disappointment had rendered Horace Fielding furious. The girl he loved, and the girl whose wealth was absolutely indispensable to him in his bankrupt creditless condition, had refused him with a determination that augured ill for the future.

The fact of having wormed his way into Joshua Vernon's favour would go for little, after all, Horace Fielding reflected, in the face of Madeline's unyielding attitude. Even if she refused to accept the husband of his choice, the old man was not likely to adopt extreme measures towards his niece to influence her decision. Under ordinary circumstances he could hardly hope to win her.

Pressed on all sides for money, angry with Madeline for the contemptuous words she had recently uttered, bent upon proving the supremacy of his will over hers, Lady Roscoe's hopeful brother spent the night in devising a plan of action for accomplishing his purpose, which would only have been entertained by a bold, thoroughly unscrupulous, and desperate man, who knew, moreover, that he had everything to gain, and very little indeed to lose by it.

He required some help in the development of his scheme, yet he dared not take his sister into his confidence.

(Continued on page 549.)

PLAIN TALK.

—o—

I HAVE something to tell you, Daisy,
You might not happen to know,
Though I wonder you didn't think it out
A good many years ago.
You'd have been a happier woman
Had you borne it well in mind,
That a husband's an easy thing to get,
But a good one is hard to find.

And now there are tears and anguish,
In place of the smiles and cheer,
That might have been yours for a life of joy,
Had you chosen it so, my dear.
And for all this pitiful heartache,
These memories fraught with shame,
I think you will find, if you look aright,
You've only yourself to blame.

If Love were the master passion
That urged to a wedded life,
If Love had been in the covenant,
That bound you as man and wife,
Oh, then, whatever had happened,
Whatever troubles you saw,
You'd have found redress at the Court of Love,
And not at a Court of Law.

For Love is a jealous spirit,
And close to the rack will hold
The heart that has followed an idle whim,
Or bartered itself for gold.
And although your friends may give you
The sympathy, dear, you claim,
I think that many will say with me,
You've only yourself to blame.

You were wayward and wilful, Daisy,
And thought it an easy thing
To give up the maiden's vestal zone
In exchange for a wedding-ring.
But if Love did not bind the bargain,
You reckoned without your host,
And are finding out that in such mistakes
The woman suffers the most.

J. P.

THE MYSTERIES OF FERNLEA.

—o—

CHAPTER X.

It had never occurred to those who knew him to consider Lady Julia's butler a coward. The man was an honest, conscientious servant, who never shirked what he believed his duty. And yet, as he turned towards the blue gallery, he would have given a great deal not to have had to explore it.

There was no old feudal devotion to the Daventrys to make him persevere. He, like most of the other servants, had only been engaged on Lady Julia's return from the continent that very summer, but to the simple-hearted man it would have been base and dishonourable to leave the fair young daughter of the house in peril.

And after Janet Dent's disappearance and Mr. Sparks's account of his night in the blue gallery the place appeared to Daniels to be full of perils, although he could not describe their nature.

He said nothing to Pauline until they had turned the corner, and stood actually in the gallery. Then, as he felt the trembling of the girl's hand, he told her kindly not to be afraid.

"No harm ever yet came to a body, Pauline, through trying to help a fellow-creature in distress; just think of that, my girl."

He stopped at Natalie's door, knocked gently; then, getting no answer, he signed to Pauline to enter. The maid looked at him so piteously that he put all ceremony aside, and led the way himself, wondering the while how he should apologise to the young lady for his intrusion if she were indeed there.

The room was in perfect darkness, but the moment they were inside the door they per-

ceived the strange, stifling odour which Daniels had noticed in Mr. Sparks's chamber only that morning.

The butler felt in his pocket for a match-box, and soon struck a light. Then, with almost a reverential hand, he drew aside the curtain of the bed.

Natalie Daventry lay there, her beautiful eyes closed; her face white as when they had found her in a swoon the night before, but her limbs seemed to the butler more rigid—her attitude more deathlike!

She was lovely even in that awful stupor.

It is a terrible thought that the actions of our lives are revealed in our faces! Look on a sleeping man or woman, and you can tell their character pretty clearly. All shams and concealments are removed in sleep. The stamp that thoughts and deeds and words have printed on our features shines forth.

Nita's young life was pure and blameless, generous, faithful and true; submissive, patient, and tender. There was no trace of evil in the face on which Pauline and the butler gazed. She looked innocent and unworldly as a little child!

"She's dead!" cried the maid, with a smothered sob. "Don't try to dissuade me from it, Mr. Daniels! She's dead; and no one can hurt her any more! She was pretty well an angel on earth, and now she's gone to be with her lover in Heaven!"

"Nonsense!" said the butler, sharply, perhaps to hide his feelings. "It's only a faint, brought on by these hateful drugs. If you only keep a hand on your shoulders, Pauline, we will save her yet!"

Pauline did not waste time in protestations. She demanded bluntly,—

"How?"

"Are you afraid to stay here with her alone?"

"Yes," was the frank reply; "but I'll stay if I must."

"We must get a doctor here at once!" said Daniels. "And, Pauline, it'd be better to send for one without asking my lady's leave. Mr. Sparks will manage it. Now, my girl, which will you do, go and tell him what's happened, or stay here with Miss Nita?"

Pauline was quick enough to know it would be far easier for the butler to obtain a private audience with "Mr. Trevanon" than herself. She was really fond of Nita, so she yielded.

"I'll stay here. Only, Mr. Daniels, for the love of Heaven, be quick! If anyone comes, or I see anything, I'm afraid I shall faint myself!"

"I'll be quick. Now, Pauline, be brave. Remember, everything depends on you."

Pauline shivered, but she had made up her mind to the sacrifice.

Used to illness, she deftly opened the windows and drew back the curtains, so as to have as much air as possible. She sponged the still face with cold water, thinking rightly that if she could only get rid of the strong, odorous drug which pervaded the atmosphere her patient would have a better chance of recovery.

She was so busy that she had no time for nervous alarms, and so a light footfall did not attract her notice, and the sudden turning of the door-handle was the first sign she had of anyone's approach.

Poor Pauline felt lost. She trembled so she could hardly keep from falling; but she made up her mind of one thing—Miss Nita was in her care, and she would contest the charge of her with anyone, ghost or mortal.

The door opened slowly and noiselessly. Pauline's eyes seemed glued to it. She could hear the beating of her own heart as she waited to see the intruder. Then she almost dropped the candle she was holding in her relief; for there entered no stranger. No ghostly visitant, only the Lady Julia Daventry, wrapped in a crimson dressing-gown, and carrying in her hand a small silver lamp.

She started as she saw Pauline. For a moment the girl fancied she frowned, but that, of course, was a mistake, since her first

words were of grateful thanks for Pauline's kind care of her child.

"I was with her myself till she fell asleep. I left her at nine, but I could not rest. I seemed so afraid that something would happen!"

"I could not find Miss Nita in her new room, my lady," explained Pauline; "and when I found her like this I could not leave her."

Lady Julia bent over her daughter.

"She is sleeping."

"No, my lady," corrected Pauline, quickly.

"She is in a state of stupor. I sent one of the servants downstairs to find you, and ask if a doctor should be summoned."

It was not the whole truth, but Pauline was frightened, Lady Julia's eyes gleamed so angrily, she thought she was going to be scolded for her presumption.

"I have been in my own room with Miss Daventry. She is gone to bed with a headache."

A distant clock struck ten.

"You had better go to bed, Pauline," said her mistress, thoughtfully. "I will take care of Miss Natalie."

Glad as she would have been to escape from the blue gallery, Pauline hesitated; some nameless impulse bade her not leave Nita, even with her mother. Yet she could not stay without angering Lady Julia.

"If you please, my lady," she said, quietly. "I should like to stay with you. You may want to send me to fetch something for Miss Natalie, and after Mrs. Dent's disappearance I don't like to leave you alone here. I'm not much protection, I know, but if any danger does come, two can face it better than one."

Lady Julia gave up the point, as though it was not worth arguing about. She sat down in a low chair by the foot of the bed, first carefully closing both the windows. Pauline dared not protest. She still bent over Natalie, hardly knowing what to do, and wishing with all her heart that the butler would return.

Meanwhile, Daniels was getting on better than he had dared to expect. He found Mr. Sparks had fully expected some fresh alarm, and that not only was the swiftest horse in the stable ready saddled, but that he had seen Dr. Arnold of Monkton that afternoon, and the great physician had mentioned carelessly he should be dining at the Rectory that evening.

"He is sure not to leave before ten. Ride quickly, my man, and you'll have him here in half-an-hour."

"He's not the family doctor, sir," Daniels ventured to observe. "Won't my lady be put out?"

"The family doctor is an arrant noodle, and this man a well-known physician. I'll manage my lady, Daniels, only you get Dr. Arnold here."

And what seemed strangest of all to the butler was that the great physician, instead of seeming surprised at his arrival, took the matter just as though he had expected him. He bade adieu to his hosts, bade his wife and daughters drive home without him, and rode off with the messenger just as though it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be summoned in frantic haste to a house he had not entered for years, and whose present mistress regarded him with ill-concealed hostility.

He said very little on the journey, only as they galloped up the avenue he turned to Daniels suddenly.

"The Rectory was in your way to Fernlea village, so that you have saved an hour. If you had waited to go on to Mr. Gibbs it would have taken you full an hour longer, even if he had been at home. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." And he did. He grasped the fact instinctively that this was to be his excuse to Lady Julia should she resent his calling in the supreme medical authority of the neighbourhood.

"I suppose your lady is very anxious?"

"We have not told her, sir."

Dr. Arnold opened his eyes.

"I begin to think you are in my friend's confidence. Now tell me, what do you call the stranger who is staying at Fernlea?"

"The household call him Mr. Trevaun, sir, but I know he is the great London detective, Mr. Sparks."

"Ah! I see I can trust you. Well, it seems we foresaw, exactly what has happened. I suppose it's another case of a drugged handkerchief, etc."

"We've found no handkerchief, sir; but it's the same drug. The room smelt enough of it to knock one down."

"And you left her there?"

"I declare, sir, I never thought of that. Of course, the thing would have been to move her, but we were so taken aback, the maid and I, that I suppose we lost our heads."

"Not quite," said the doctor, reassuringly. "I think you have shown great presence of mind, Mr. Daniels. Ah! here we are. It's many a long day since I was called in to attend a Daventry."

The lawyer and Mr. Sparks met them in the hall, but Dr. Arnold put both aside.

"Let me go straight to the poor child! If it be as I think there is no time to lose."

He followed his guide swiftly up the broad oaken staircase, on through passages and corridors till he came to the blue gallery. He pushed the door open and entered, his eagle eyes taking in the whole scene before Lady Julia rose and confronted him.

"You here?" she gasped.

He maintained his perfect calm.

"Why, yes," he said, coolly. "You see it was an urgent case, and your servant seemed to think it a pity to waste an hour by going on to Mr. Gibbs; besides, I fancy the case is more in my line. Gibbs is a very decent fellow, but he has had no experience in cases of this kind. I have."

She had grown deadly pale. Evidently her dislike of Dr. Arnold was no idle fancy, but a real, inveterate hatred.

"I should have thought you would not care to come here unsummoned."

He smiled.

"If I were very hard up for patients I might have stood on my dignity and feared Gibbs resenting my treading on his ground; but, as everyone knows, I have more to do than I care about. I think I can afford to laugh at your hint, and now, if you please, my lady, we will proceed to business."

It was strange how his manner changed as he bent over Nita. He dropped his sharp, caustic tone, his air of defiance, and became at once the tender, fatherly doctor, whose fame was known through all Blankshire. He put a few questions to Pauline, and then said, quietly,—

"She had better be moved at once."

Lady Julia started.

"The poor child had better be taken to my room. No one can watch over her like a mother."

Dr. Arnold smiled coldly.

"I quite agree with you, Lady Julia. Your sick nursing is unequalled in its results, but I do not think Miss Natalie will require such extreme attention. Any airy room will do."

My lady darted a malevolent glance at him.

"Do you dispute my authority over my own child?"

"It is a well-known fact that a doctor has supreme authority over his patients. You look tired, Lady Julia, and it is getting late. The maid seems skilful and attentive. Don't you think you had better go to bed?"

To Pauline's surprise her mistress fell in with the suggestion and retired. Dr. Arnold drew a breath of relief as she left the apartment five minutes later. When she might be supposed to have reached her own room he raised the slight form of poor, unconscious Natalie in his arms, and said abruptly to Pauline,—

"Take the lamp and lead the way. Any room will do. In summer weather there is no

damp. One in the main part of the house is best, not up any long distant passage like this."

Pauline took the lamp and led the way to a very pleasant airy room, exactly between Mr. Trevaun's chamber and that occupied by Mr. Gray.

"Excellent!" said the doctor, when she had explained one to him. "Now go and get some wine. Fetch it yourself. Do you understand? Don't take any you see about!"

The caution was not unneeded. On the stairs Pauline encountered her mistress carrying a glass of wine.

"I am sure a little stimulant must be necessary," she said, as Pauline detailed her errand. "Take this to the poor child. I can easily ring for some more for myself!"

"Dr. Arnold said port, my lady," said Pauline, simply, "and he seems such a determined gentleman there's no question he'd send me back again if I brought him sherry."

This was unanswerable. Pauline was allowed to execute her errand. When she got back to the room Natalie was sitting up, a strange bright light in her violet eyes.

"Say it is not true!" she pleaded with passionate eagerness. "We loved each other so, and I have no one else. Heaven surely wouldn't be so cruel as to part us! Oh, it can't be true!"

The doctor looked at her pityingly. He had daughters of his own, and his heart ached for her; but not even to keep in the feeble flame of life, which seemed so ready to die out, would he attempt to deceive her. He knew that memory had returned, that the plain travelling dress she still wore was reminding her of her intended journey. In a little while recollection would return clearly, and then she must know all. Why stoop to a deception that could last but a brief space?

"My poor child!"

Natalie looked at him wonderingly. Then she caught sight of the maid, and a wistful smile broke out on her pale face.

"You will tell me, Pauline!" she whispered, "you were young too. Don't you remember a message came that he was dying, and I must come to say 'good-bye'! Even mother did not refuse then. Oh! Pauline, what happened next? Why are we here?"

"You had better tell her," said the doctor in a whisper. "Nothing is so cruel as suspense."

"But it will break her heart, sir!" pleaded the maid.

"Better let her know the worst while she is so weak and ill. The very bodily danger will prevent its doing her so much harm."

Pauline gave way. The tears stood in her eyes as she bent over Natalie.

"He was one of the bravest gentlemen I ever saw, Miss Nita," she said, gently, "and one of the handsomest too! He loved you as his very life; but when the summons came what could he do but go?"

"It is true then. He is dead?"

"He's taken from you for a while," said Pauline, sobbing, "but he loves you just the same. Oh! Miss Nita, it's better to weep over the grave of one we trusted, and who never failed our trust, than to live to rue the day we ever listened to vows made only to be broken. You've your lover waiting for you in Heaven, Miss Nita; and many a poor girl has married the man of her choice, and had her heart broken by his falseness. You're better off than them!"

Nita closed her eyes half dreamily.

"I shall go to him!" she whispered faintly, "though he can't come back to me. And I don't think it will be very long. The world is a cold, hard place, and I am so tired!"

She was asleep almost as soon as she finished speaking. Dr. Arnold listened to her regular breathing for a few moments, then looked at Pauline with a well-satisfied nod.

"She will do now! Just come on the landing for a moment. I must speak to you, and voices may disturb her."

Pauline followed, her eyes still wet. She had had a love story of her own—and a sad one—which, perhaps, explained her deep sympathy with Nita.

"Look here!" said the doctor, abruptly, "What is your position here? How long have you been in the family?"

"A good while. I am Miss Daventry's maid!"

"Ah, the heiress! And you have nothing to do with Miss Natalie?"

"Very little, generally. Mrs. Dent mostly waited on Miss Nita; and you see, sir, it isn't long since she left the convent! but I'm very fond of her!"

"Either you must undertake never to leave her for the next few days, or I must find a professional nurse. Now, if you elect to stay with her you run a chance of offending Lady Julia and losing your place?"

"That doesn't matter, sir," said Pauline, quietly. "I have not intended remaining here very long. My old mistress I lived with, before I came to Lady Julia, is returning from India in a week, while, besides, I have a good home to go to. I will stay with Miss Nita, come what may!"

The doctor nodded approval (he was a man of few words), and then he went downstairs to the library, where the detective and Mr. Gray still sat waiting for him.

"She is saved this time," he said, calmly; "but I won't answer for the consequences of another attempt. If the mysteries of Fernlea continue unchecked I warn you, Natalie Daventry will die!"

Mr. Gray looked thoroughly helpless. A respectable family lawyer, he did not like the state of affairs at all. He had not yet been Lady Julia's guest a week, and he had gone through so much in the time that his uppermost desire was to get back to his chambers in the Temple. There was something, he thought, most unprofessional and unbusiness-like in a family lawyer being mixed up with ghostly visitants, nocturnal alarms, and the like. So he said nothing, and only hoped none of his legal brethren would ever hear of his most unwished-for exploits.

The detective took quite another view. To his mind the whole thing was an interesting "case."

The butler, who, by common consent, had been allowed to come in and hear the doctor's verdict, seemed almost as disconsolate as Mr. Gray. His situation was a lucrative one, Lady Julia an easy mistress. The Daventrys were a family of known position, to serve whom did him credit; but for all that, like the lawyer, his one idea was to get away—not suddenly and clandestinely—not till he had done all in his power to help the search for the cause of all these mysterious affairs; but still, for all that, his eventual purpose was just the same as Mr. Gray's—flight at any cost.

The detective turned to the doctor quietly, with a very simple question.

"What is to be done?"

"I have charged the maid to keep guard over the young lady night and day. I think her discretion is to be relied upon; and as soon as it is safe to move Miss Natalie, I shall insist on her having a complete change."

"Pardon me, but you seem reading my question. It seems to me," said Mr. Sparks impressively, "there has been a distinct attempt to commit murder."

"Well, I suppose it comes to that?"

"Once on my own person, and twice on that of Lady Julia's daughter. Now Dr. Arnold, surely this is not to go unpanished."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"A distinct attempt at murder by some person or persons unknown," he said gravely. "But until you can alter the last word of that sentence, I see no remedy!"

"The culprit must be found."

"Just so. Find the culprit, and you have the strongest grounds to prove their guilt; but, gentlemen, my belief is that culprit will not be found. At present you have not the shadow of a proof against anyone."

Mr. Sparks shook his head.

"No proof, I grant, but suspicion ought to justify serious measures."

"Suspicion goes for nothing. I repeat you have no proof. I imagine you believe the three attempts at poisoning or suffocation—either word applies—were the work of one and the same person?"

"Certainly."

"Then," said the doctor, in his dry matter-of-fact tone, "you must please remember Mr. Sparks, that, from your own account, it seems impossible any human creature could have entered your room last night. Looked door, bolted door, and barred window, surely kept out all intruders."

"But—"

"Lady Julia Daventry, as the nominal mistress of the house, would allege one or two things either unpalatable to you—that you had a ghostly visitation, or that you fabricated the whole affair, and the case would fall through."

The detective looked deeply injured.

"Scarcely with my reputation—"

"My good sir," interrupted the doctor. "Your reputation won't make people call you infallible. They will think you the victim of a clever hoax or pretended ghost, if you publish the case, unless you are lucky enough to do one of two things."

"Firstly, you must prove upon the individual who scatters dragged handkerchiefs about in the very room, if you do the first, you will at once discover everything, for she is either a victim or a confederate. But, in the second case, you would have to arrest the culprit on the spot, be they man, woman, or ghost."

Mr. Sparks waited a moment in deep thought. To say that he was perplexed did not at all express his bewildered state of mind.

"I'll do it," he said, at last, slowly, in quite a different voice from his usual fresh, cheerful tone. "I've never been foiled yet, and I'm not going to begin now. I'll find out the mysteries of Fernlea if it takes me a lifetime. And, what's more, I won't touch another stroke of business until I have done with this one. It may be a tedious affair, but I'll find the scent at last, and see whether even ghosts can't be brought to respect the honest laws of England!"

"Bravo!" returned the doctor. "Mr. Gray, you have not spoken at all. What is your opinion?"

"My opinion, gentlemen, is that the sooner I get out of this house the better I shall be pleased. I'm not a coward," and he drew himself up in a very warlike manner, "but I detest mysteries; and I heartily wish I had never set foot in Fernlea!"

"When are you going?" asked Mr. Sparks, trying to hide an amused smile.

"As soon as I can. And if this state of things continues I shall take care to be represented by my senior clerk as Miss Daventry's coming of age. I'm a plain man of business, and I don't approve of ghosts."

"Few people do," acquiesced Doctor Arnold.

"I'm thinking, gentlemen," said a voice, which had not been heard since the consultation began, "you're forgetting one thing. Is nothing to be done about poor Miss Dent? Is a decent body to be hurried out of her bed at the dead of the night, and made away with without anyone finding out how she was killed, and seeing she had a proper burying?"

"Lady Julia consented this morning to offer a reward. You will see the placards of it all over Fernlea and Monkton to-morrow," replied the detective. "And now I think we had better disperse. I shall spend the night in Miss Dent's room, but I don't expect anything to happen."

And nothing did happen. Everyone at Fernlea was left as peaceful and undisturbed as though the house had had no mysterious visitants.

Doctor Arnold spent the night there, and looked in upon Natalie two or three times. She was always sleeping peacefully, and Pauline declared there had been no alarms.

The physician remained to breakfast, and after it was over sent a request to speak to Lady Julia. She received him in her own sitting-room, and as he closed the door after he entered he fancied he saw her tremble.

"I bring you the best of news, Lady Julia. Your daughter is out of danger. Keep her quiet for two or three days, and her bodily health will be as good as ever; but I fear it will be some time before she recovers from the depression caused by her lover's death."

"It was a most disastrous affair; but one can't help feeling thankful he is gone, poor young man! I never could have consented to the match."

"Indeed? I never met Mr. Yorke myself, but my wife and girls struck up quite an acquaintance with him, and pronounced him charming. I can't understand your objections to him as a son-in-law."

"I had none, but—doctor, you know me long ago. You must have heard something of my family?"

"All the world knows you are an Earl's daughter, though your father's title has become extinct."

"Yes, I was an only child. My mother died in a frantic asyle, Doctor Arnold, and her mother before her. I take after my father, and have inherited no more of the awful malady; but it often misses a generation, and I have every fear my mother's fate will be Natalie's."

Doctor Arnold started. He knew from the lawyer of Lady Julia's peremptory refusal to listen to Mr. Yorke's suit—the declaration Nita should be a nun. Could there be any reason for it except her own caprice? Was it possible he had just listened to her true motive? Could it be that her very peculiar treatment of her youngest child came from a dread of the doom in store for her?

"I think you are mistaken," he said, speaking in a far kinder tone than he had yet used. "Your daughter strikes me as being peculiarly quiet and collected. I see no signs of mental excitement about her."

"But the mischief must be there."

"Not at all! You say you take entirely after your father. Why should not Miss Nita take after hers? I think myself she is remarkably like the Daventrys. I see not the least resemblance to your side of the house."

"Ah! You do not know a mother's anxiety."

"I can sympathise with it, at any rate. Lady Julia, I have a proposal to make to you. This poor girl will never recover here at Fernlea. It was the scene of her brief courtship, and must be haunted for her by the mysterious disappearance of her nurse. The very air of the place is against her. As soon as she is better let her come and stay with us. My wife is a born nurse, and we have a household of healthy merry boys and girls. I don't recommend our home as a 'quiet' place, but I don't think it is quiet your girl requires. I knew and loved her father. Let her come and spend a month or so with us. Monkton is only an easy drive, and you can come over yourself and inspect her progress."

He expected an indignant refusal, but Lady Julia appeared grateful and even pleased with the invitation.

"It is most kind of you, doctor. But Mrs. Arnold may not care to have an invalid guest?"

"My wife delights in anyone to nurse and coddle. Besides, Lady Julia, I confess I have another reason. If I have Natalie domesticated with us, under my own eye as it were, I can watch her closely, and form a professional opinion as to whether your fears are justified, or only the result of an over-anxious imagination."

The mistress of Fernlea looked touched.

"It is very good of you, doctor. Especially after—"

He would not let her finish.

"Let bygones be forgotten, Lady Julia. I would only wish to remember that long ago I owed much to the Daventrys, and I would gladly do all in my power for anyone who bore that name. Trust your daughter to us, and I promise you we will take every care of her!"

"And you will give me your real opinion?"

"I will—I promise it. If Natalie exhibits the slightest symptoms of eccentricity I will tell you. I think myself, you know, the child's brain is perfectly right, and that you are over-anxious."

Lady Julia sighed.

"I know the world has thought me an unnatural mother, but I have been in a cruel plight. How could I bring the child forward and let her mix in society knowing the doom which awaited her! Oh! doctor, it was a cruel contrast—my stepdaughter with her robust health and splendid fortune, while my own poor girl was penniless and doomed to this awful fate!"

"I don't believe she is doomed to it, Lady Julia. Now remember I shall send my wife over to make the invitation in all proper form, and I quite expect to see Natalie in two or three days."

Mrs. Arnold was a clever woman and a devoted wife. Her household was beautifully managed, her servants well ordered, and her children perfectly cared for—although she was not one of those who believe that the kitchen and the nursery are the sole sphere for women's work.

In many of life's perplexities the doctor had gone to her for sympathy and advice. He loved her dearly, and was not too proud to confess that her woman's wit had more than once solved questions which puzzled his science.

Wealth had come to them now, and few people in Monkton could boast a larger income, but Mrs. Arnold kept her simple habits—her quiet refinement. She had never cared for show or display, so she did not launch into either when her husband means increased. She accepted invitations when they came; she welcomed her friends gladly, but she never developed into a fashionable woman, and it was a blessing for her husband she did not.

He went to her that evening in the quiet home before dinner, and told his story. Unlike him, she had no previous acquaintance with Lady Julia, but she had seen her and Nita together, and condemned her behaviour as cruel, heartless, and unmotherly.

"Well?" said the doctor, impatiently, when he had waited quite five minutes, and still his Molly did not speak.

"I am thinking, Karl."

"You don't mind having the poor child here I hope, Molly?"

"I shall be delighted. I believe I fell in love with her at first sight. But Karl, I can't bear Lady Julia or Miss Daventry!"

"Go on," he said, with a smile.

"And I don't believe a word about the insanity!"

"Softly, Molly. Lady Julia's mother, as a Countess, was a public character; her daughter would not dare to say she died in an asylum if it could be proved to the contrary!"

"I don't care about countesses. I am certain there is no taint of insanity about Nita."

"You have only seen her twice."

"Once would be enough. She is a Daventry to the finger tips. Why, she has not a trace of her mother about her. Poor child, that young man was as fine a fellow as I ever saw! To think of her losing him!"

Doctor Arnold smiled.

"Molly, you are younger and far more romantic than your daughters!"

"Perhaps. When is this child coming?"

"I promised you should make the invitation with proper ceremony. But, Molly, every night she spends under that roof is a risk!"

"You don't mean that you believe those absurd stories? Karl, I am ashamed of you!"



[PAULINE'S EXPLANATION.]

"I believe, dear, that Fernlea is haunted; but I don't say whether by the spirits of the dead, or by the evil passions of the living. Anyway, little Nita will never get well in the house where she lost her nurse so strangely."

"I will go over to-morrow, Karl, and bring the child back, unless her mother forbids."

But, contrary to the doctor's expectation, Lady Julia was most gracious, and Nita returned with her hostess—a very pale and hollow-eyed Nita, one who seemed hardly able to think, and who wore a heavy black dress, edged with crepe.

"I belonged to Ronald," she whispered timidly to Mrs. Arnold; "and I got mother to let me wear this for his sake. You won't mind?"

Mrs. Arnold kissed her.

"Wear what you like, childie; and do as you please. We only want to make you happy."

"I shall never be happy again!"

"My dear, do you think he would wish that? I know something of Ronald Yorke—enough to remember him as one of the most generous men I ever met. Do you think he would wish you to spend your whole life in mourning because he has been taken from you?"

Nita sighed.

"He was all I had!"

"And he deserved the warmest love of a girl's heart. But, Natalie, you must not spend your whole life in weeping. I don't wonder that you mourn him, but there is comfort for you. It is something to have been chosen by such a man—to have such a lover to remember!"

"Yes," said Nita, slowly. "When I am far away in the convent it will be something to remember. At least, I shall have loved!"

"Dear child, you will not go to a convent! If everyone who was disappointed in love became a nun, there would not be convents enough to hold them. You have work to do in the world!"

Nita settled down very soon in the doctor's

house. She was treated just a little as an invalid, but only enough to give an excuse for making much of her.

Everyone took to the sweet, gentle girl, whose pathetic story moved all hearts. And before she had been under his roof three days Dr. Arnold's mind was made up.

"Molly," he said to his wife, "I will hear your opinion afterwards—first listen to mine. That child is no more insane than I am."

"And she has not the least tendency to mania," put in Mrs. Arnold. "I have watched her carefully. She is quiet, gentle, collected, calm. These are not the qualities of a girl likely to go out of her mind. I have never seen her even excited."

"Nor I."

"Of course you will tell Lady Julia?"

"I shall tell her nothing till the month's end. She promised Nita to us for a month. When that is over, we will see."

She was a good wife. She never asked his reasons. She felt a secret consciousness that he distrusted Lady Julia, but she knew he would have told her if he had wished her to know, and she was content to wait until his confidence came unsought.

It was a very simple household—two servants and a boy, a man to drive the brougham and look after the garden, which was the glory of Mrs. Arnold's heart.

Nita, too, loved the beautiful lawn and leafy walks. There was a rustic arbour some way from the house, where she would take a book or piece of work and sit for hours.

One day, when she had been at Monkton nearly a week, it chanced that Mrs. Arnold and her girls were going to a bazaar for some local charity. It was thought too fatiguing an expedition for Nita. Besides, her grief for Ronald was too keen for her to enjoy sight-seeing. She said at once she would stay at home. She could spend the afternoon quite contentedly in the garden, and perhaps the children might have tea with her in the arbour,

a proposal which delighted the three fair-haired mites who made up the nursery establishment.

Not one idea of harm came to Mrs. Arnold; even the doctor saw nothing to cause alarm.

Nita was not at all averse to solitude. She could be as happy alone in the grounds as in the heat and bustle of the bazaar. And yet from that simple arrangement sprang a world of confusion, doubt, and sorrow.

When Mrs. Arnold drove off Nita was strolling slowly down the garden to her favourite seat.

A good hour later the nurse went to see how the young lady was getting on, and at what hour she should bring the children to the arbour—but Nita was gone!

Bewildered, the old woman thought Miss Daventry must be ill, and have gone back to the house. She was hurrying there in search of her, when she caught sight of a slip of paper lying on the ground.

It was unfolded, and the servant who had lived with the doctor's wife for years saw no treachery to her mistress in reading the few straggling lines,—

"DEAREST MRS. ARNOLD,—Don't think me ungrateful, but my dear old nurse has sent for me. Janet is ill, and wants me. I could not refuse to go to her."

Nurse Giddings wished her master or Mrs. Arnold were at home. She was no gossip, but she had heard of the mysteries of Fernlea, and it seemed to her that if Nita Daventry had indeed gone at the bidding of Janet Dent, she was likely to share her perils.

With a strangely solemn face she walked back to the house, and chanced to see the doctor entering it.

In a moment she had put the paper in his hand, and told her story.

The physician must have had some strange suspicions of his own, for his ejaculation was,—

"Heaven help the poor child! She is lost!"

(To be continued.)



"I WAS TO TAKE THE MARCHESA AS MY BRIDE," SIGNOR PALEZZI SAID.

NOVELETTE.]

BIRDIE.

—:—

CHAPTER I.

A LARGE white house, its many windows glistening like diamonds in the sun, the lower ones peeping out from amid the green and red of the trailing roses which, in summer time, grew over the entrance extending each side to the extreme corner, around which a stray spray would break from its band of cloth which attached it to the wall, to hang listlessly on the other side.

Around the large space of gravel in front a shrubbery ran, divided by the large iron gates opening on the highway, which it had been planted intentionally to hide, not so much from those within as to obstruct the view of those without, chiefly consisting of labourers going to and fro from their daily toil on the neighbouring farms, their owners and the clergy of the surrounding villages being the chief society in Munford, where "The White House" was situated.

The Squire, who was my mother's father, lived in the Hall, not a mile distant, and in the bright summer-tide we could see from the top windows of the other, which was our home, the blue smoke rise, twisting and curling from over the deep green of the trees which surrounded it in the distance.

But he was dead at the time to which my memory carries me back; his son, my uncle, becoming proprietor of the ancient building dating back to the Crusades, whilst another uncle, owning the next largest estate in the parish—our family monopolised the greatest part, a fact which gained for us absolute sway amongst the inhabitants, who ever spoke of us as their young ladies, and the daughters of their Vicar.

My father had not always lived at Munford, and I believe I was not born there, but I never knew any other home; and all the joys and sorrows of my young life were centred within the iron gates, which, to my mind, enclosed the loveliest spot on the terrestrial globe. I could not conceive a sweeter garden than the one we could see from our drawing-room window, which looked out from the side, for the house ran far back, covering an immense space of ground, whilst that in which was grown all that was necessary to the kitchen, in the way of fruit and vegetables, was divided by a narrow lane, each side of which a wide deep ditch ran like a miniature moat, with a tiny wooden bridge across on which a green door opened, fastened by lock and key to avoid the depredations which would otherwise have been indulged in by the youth of the village.

An immense chestnut spread its branches over the centre of the grass-plot where the flower-beds were, whilst from one of its strong boughs a swing was fastened for our amusement, and in which, with my head resting against one of the ropes, I have so often sat dreaming of the future, with the song of the birds and the hum of the busy-bees around me, and the rays of the warm sun endeavouring to reach me amid the full branches swayed hither and thither by the summer breeze.

But it was to be before that time that my memory carries me back, when but a child of four years, my mother died, leaving, besides myself, another sister two years my junior, and a two-month old baby behind her.

It was in January, and ignorant of the loss I had sustained, with childish curiosity I watched from my nursery window the black line of carriages as they passed over the snow, which now thickly covered the ground, and then wended their way slowly and solemnly through the iron gates to the church in the distance, the deep tone of the bell falling at intervals on the wintry air, whilst I pressed my baby nose against the pane, straining my

eyes until the last one had disappeared, when, turning for the first time, I learnt from the girl who had attended me that they had gone to bury my dead mother.

At first I could not realize her meaning, but it soon revealed itself to me, and then my first grief came to me in all its intensity, and for days I would continue to cry for her who could hear me no more.

But the years passed on and she was soon forgotten, and we were as happy as children mostly are who have all they require of this world's goods, and are reared with the gentleness and kindness we received. It was thus time quickly fled, and at sixteen I was considered to have so far completed my studies that I had no further need to continue them in the school-room, where my two younger sisters, Mabel and Ella were yet pursuing theirs under the charge of Miss Karlake, a governess who was but a few years my senior.

She was a fair, tall girl of twenty-two, with eyes blue as the heavens, the faintest tinge of pink on her delicate cheek, whilst her lips were like a rosebud, and from the first my heart warmed towards her, so different in every way to the austere and middle-aged ladies who had preceded her, and during whose reign revolution was ever rife in the school-room; but which entirely subsided when Birdie Karlake held the reins of government, Mabel and Ella's high spirit becoming quiet and subdued beneath the influence of her power.

Whatever her friends could be thinking of, the ladies would say, to allow a beautiful young thing like her to go as governess in the house of a widower; and even the old house-keeper, who had been with us ever since our mother's death, held up her hands in astonishment, when Miss Faithfull's (who was the last one) successor presented herself.

Master must be mad, she insisted, for if he never spoke a word to the girl, the neighbours would be sure to concoct a thousand stories to

his discredit with regard to the beautiful governess, all of which came to my father's ears, without drawing anything further than a smile from him; and Birdie remained in our nest making us very happy, and outliving the ill-natured comments her beauty had evoked. And so the months passed into years, and people no longer talked of the Vicar, to whom they had some time since now given credit for better sense than to make love to a girl little older than his own daughters, when, least expected, the news that he was going to be married fell like a bomb-shell in their midst.

"That was what Birdie had been angling for, for the last two years, with her simpering ways and quiet looks," Miss Mathews, a lady of uncertain age, declared, who had, ever since our mother's death, looked upon herself as the most proper person to fill that mother's place, having been born and reared in the village, and knowing every man, woman, and child in it. "Poor children!" she continued, to the neighbour with whom she was conversing on the subject; and then she heaved a sigh in contemplation of the miseries and cruelties we were supposed to be subjected to when Birdie became Mrs. McFarlen.

"Ain't it ridiculous now," the woman replied, to whom Miss Mathews was a good customer, she being a small trader in the parish. "A man old enough to be her father," and then she looked into the lady's face, as much as to say, "now if it had been you!" took thoroughly understood by the other, who immediately made another small purchase, although the article was perfectly useless to her, when after a few more confidences, in which the Vicar's and Miss Mathews's names were freely handled she left the shop.

Cook gave notice shortly after, declaring she would not remain a day after Mrs. Frost the housekeeper left, whilst nurse was in a continual bath of tears, looking so far into futurity as to wonder how the master could think for one moment she would stay to nurse the children of a second wife, the housemaid alone espousing the cause of the poor girl, who, to avoid further scandal, determined to leave the White House until she returned to it as its mistress.

My father could not avoid being aware of how the rumour of his marriage had effected his parishioners towards him, but he took no more notice now than when, three years since, they had aired their opinion respecting his choice of a governess for his children. He shook hands as cordially with Miss Mathews, and increased rather than decreased his orders at the little shop, as though neither had ever uttered a word in disparagement of his conduct, whilst he failed to see the cold shoulder turned towards him, and the tone of reception was apparently lost on him.

I quickly overcame the jealous twinge which attacked me, when I first heard from Birdie herself how matters stood, but on Mabel and Ella the confession had a different effect.

"I shall almost hate her now, they both avowed, and I was not sorry, for her sake, when I saw the willowy form of our late governess, wrapped in a long sealskin cloak, the gift of my father, quit the house where I trusted, when she again returned with the spring flowers, she would bring with her a renewal of the love which was previously hers.

"You will love me still Gertie," she said, as she at the last moment drew me towards her, and pressed a warm kiss on my lips, and in that moment, I forgot all but how beautiful, how lovable she looked, and threw my arms round her neck, returning passionately the kiss she had given. She then held out her hand to Mabel and Ella, but they merely touched the tips of her fingers, and I could see the tears well to her beautiful eyes as they drew back from the embrace she offered, and then she stepped into the carriage awaiting her, the sound of a dry sob not escaping my ears as she turned from us.

"How could you be so unkind," I said, when

for the last time having waved an adieu to her, I turned to my sisters, who, with their arms twined round each other's waists, were watching my movements. "We had only papa, and she has taken him from us," they replied with pouting lips, and they would have said more, had not the handle of the library door which opened on to the hall turned, and my father made his appearance.

He came up to where they stood, kindly telling them they had no time to lose if they would dress preparatory to dinner, and I knew he had heard nothing of what they had said, with that door closed between them, and he thinking but of the girl whom he had been watching from the window until the last glimpse of the carriage containing his jewel had passed from his view.

So Mabel and Ella moved from the spot, a sense of deep injustice clouding the usual brightness of their happy lives; and I ascended to my own room, wondering the while if my father had acted wisely in linking the fate of one so young as Birdie with his own.

But he evidently never thought for a moment but that his judgment in the choice of the bride he had selected was a correct one, and the disparity in their years was a point to which, I believe, he had never given a second consideration.

"Of course, Birdie's standing in this household will, on her return, be quite entirely different footing, Gertie," he told me, when, after dinner, he confided to me that position; "and I trust for my sake you will do all you can to contribute to her happiness, treating her in every respect as though she was your own mother."

"Scarcely that, papa," I smiled, as it occurred to me how absurd the notion was of looking on this girl, little older than myself, in the light of a parent; "but I will love her as an elder sister, never forgetting that she is your wife," I added.

"You are a good girl," he said, stroking my hair; and then I turned to join Mabel and Ella who were singing a duet in the drawing-room, leaving him in happy contemplation of his new-born happiness.

CHAPTER II.

A few weeks after, and a brother clergyman agreed to officiate in his stead the while he was absent on a short holiday, he told him; but I knew when he returned to Munford he would bring Birdie with him as his wife.

The winter had passed; even the cold easterly winds, so prevalent in spring, giving way to a soft, balmy breeze, and a bright sun filled the air with a genial warmth on the day we were led to expect the arrival of the newly-married pair.

I had so far succeeded in reconciling my sisters to what they considered their hard fate as to raise a smile on their gloomy countenances, when carriage wheels rounded on the gravel, and they rendered scarce a less warm welcome to our late governess than I did myself.

How pretty, I thought, she looked, a light tulle bonnet, as simple as it was elegant, resting on the bright gold of her rich hair, when, placing a tiny gloved hand in that of my father, she descended from the carriage. A flush of excitement showed itself on either cheek as she ascended the steps leading to the entrance hall, and there was a certain timidity in her movements, as though she feared the reception awaiting her; but seeing me the first to express my welcome, the tears started to her eyes, and then we were locked in each other's embrace.

"Birdie still, dear," she said, seeing, as she fancied, a hesitation on my part as to how I should address her, and then moving towards the others she held out a hand to each, looking so bewitching the while that even they could not resist the influence of her charm.

But after awhile even that failed to weigh against the feeling of jealousy my younger

sisters entertained towards her, which was not lessened by the teaching of Miss Mathews whenever they happened to come in contact with that lady.

"A simpering bit of a girl like that! I can't think how you young ladies can bear to see her filling the place left vacant by the death of your sainted mother!" she said, when on one occasion they met not long after Birdie's return; "but there, poor dears," she continued, "you were not old enough to know the loss you sustained when it pleased the Lord to take her," and Miss Mathews closed her eyes in saintly humility, "or you would never bring your tongue to call this one mamma."

"Oh, we never do that, Miss Mathews," Mabel replied; "she is so little older than ourselves, it would be absurd!"

"Absurd! I should think so. Now if your father had married a woman of his own age," and Miss Mathews paused, trusting they would see the point of her argument; "why no one would have said a word against it, for it is not natural that Mr. McFarlen should have married again." But the girls failed to understand her meaning, or even if they did decidedly gave preference to the one already made than to have had such a person as her for their stepmother: so stating as an excuse that they must return quickly, for it was near upon dinner time, they bade the resident lady good bye.

There was in the months that succeeded no direct outbreak in the house circle at the White House, but my father could not fail to observe that a feeling of discontent had entered within, and I found it useless to endeavour to dispel these foolish jealousy which had taken so deep a hold of my sister's imagination that the attempt at once made them cast such from their minds only fanned the flame of the animosity they now nurtured towards their youthful stepmother.

"Oh! of course you take her part," they would say, "and we are always in the wrong, as we are with papa now. We will go as governesses ourselves, anything rather than stay here," they added, passionately, "Miss Mathews, everyone wonders we can remain to be snubbed as we are, and all because of her, until we hate her!"

We were seated in the drawing-room, the lamps had not been as yet lighted, for we preferred to sit by the open window to watch the bright crimson and gold of the setting sun from amid the deep green of the distant trees, until it gradually faded from view, leaving nought but the silver-grey of the clouds with their golden edges to tell where he had sunk to rest, and then the shadows of night fell over all.

"Miss Mathews is no friend of yours!" I answered, hotly, for I was sick of hearing her name so often brought forward; and then I rose with the intention of ringing for lights, when I fancied the door closed softly, but no one answering my question, "Who is there?" I concluded I was mistaken. I pulled the bell, and shortly after a servant entered with lights.

My father followed almost immediately, seemingly surprised to find us girls alone.

"Where is Birdie?" he asked.

"I thought she was with you," I answered.

"We have not seen her all the evening."

"Go and find her," he said, looking sharply towards my sisters, fearing, I knew, that they had, through some fresh unkindness, driven her from the room; but on my volunteering to seek her he made no further remark, only impatiently awaiting the solution of her absenting herself.

I was not away more than ten minutes I was sure, but before I returned he was calling me, and when I re-entered the drawing-room he looked up anxiously to see without my speaking first that something was amiss.

"What is it, Gertie?" he asked.

"She is in her own room, papa," I answered, "and—very—ill."

"Ill!" he exclaimed, "and all alone!" And then he rang the bell violently, giving

directions that a man from the stables should be sent at once for Dr. Clowes, when he followed me along the corridor leading to Birdie's room.

I had already ordered the housemaid not to leave her until my return; but she turned as he advanced towards the bed on which she lay, and I knew the signs of weeping apparent on her countenance was not caused so much from the pain she was suffering as from the unkind words uttered by Mabel which she had overheard.

"I did not intend to listen," she had told me; "but do not let your father know; it would only get them into trouble."

It was but a short distance to the doctor's residence, and within the hour he had arrived; but it was not until the grey of the early dawn came peeping within the closed blinds that he took his departure, and then a tiny sister was added to our fold—another link, as the others thought, to draw our father closer to his girl-wife and further from them.

"A pity it wasn't born dead," they said; but when on the second day Nurse exultantly displayed it to us as "the most beautiful baby she ever saw," they could not deny but that it was a sweet little thing, for it opened its pretty eyes, looking as though to crave the love they had determined to withhold from it.

One consolation they found was in its not being a boy, for in that case they felt sure our father would have made an idol of it; but as it was he took little or no notice of the tiny mite, even to Birdie's eulogiums on its beauty, saying he was not much of a judge of babies, but he supposed it was all right, and he would be better able to give an opinion after it had had a short time to grow; and as if anxious to do so quickly it fed and slept and slept and fed until dimples one could not resist displayed themselves in a marvellous way; and when he, after the third week, just touched its waxen cheek, the little month weathed itself into its first smile, which won his heart in an instant.

The christening was to be deferred until Birdie's recovery, which was so slow, that although he had never expressed his fear, I knew papa was growing each day more anxious about her.

Baby was now a month old, and yet she had never left her room, the fatigue of being removed even to her couch apparently too much for her.

It was on one of these days, when, with Nurse's assistance, I had drawn her up to the open window, for it was a glorious evening in July, that she held my hand as I was about to move away.

"Don't go, Gertie," she said, "but sit down here, dear, by my side. I have so much to say to you, and—my time is not very long."

I took the seat she indicated, close by where the sweet honeysuckle was trained, filling the room with its fragrance. The glare of the midday sun had softened as its rays fell on the green grass, a gentle breeze amid the rustling leaves where the branches of the trees swayed to and fro, the only sound save the song of the feathered minstrels in their midst, and for a moment all seemed so peaceful, so calm, that a single thought of trouble never entered my imagination; but on her repeating the words I turned, and then, for the first time, the truth of what she said revealed itself to me. (Her stay would not be long here!) But it came to me so suddenly that for the moment I could not utter a word, and when I recovered myself sufficiently to speak lightly of her fears, I knew that she was aware they were shared by me equally as herself.

"No, dear," she returned, in reply to some remark I made as to their being groundless. "It is no use, Gertie, to deceive you or myself; I shall never be well again. Dr. Clowes has told me as much, and I begged of him not to say so to your father; but I think you love me, Gertie," she added, looking wistfully into my face with those wondrous blue eyes I

always thought so beautiful, but which appeared doubly so now.

"Love you, Birdie!" I replied, "even more than my own sisters. But you must not talk of going, dear—you so young, so beautiful!" and then I broke down. I could say no more, as, throwing myself on my knees by her side, I buried my face in her robe to stifle the sobs I could not control.

She passed her white transparent hand over my hair.

"Don't cry, Gertie," she said. "It is all for the best. Mabel and Ella do not like me, and I could not feel happy in the thought that I should come between them and their father. You don't think it was my wish to do so, do you, dear?" she continued; "for, indeed, it was not. I wanted so to love them as I love you, but they would not let me; and when I am gone, maybe they will think more kindly of me!"

She paused for a few moments then; a faint tinge of pink had dyed her cheek in her excitement, whilst a last ray of the sun, which was sinking lower and lower, rested on her golden hair like a halo around her, the white peignoir she wore hanging loosely over her figure, adding to the ethereal beauty, which even sickness was powerless to take from her.

"I want to give her to you, dear—my baby—Gertie—before I go," she added; and then she nervously awaited my reply, but I could only press her hand, I could not speak. "You will love her—be her mother? Tell me you will," she went on, "and I shall die happy!"

"I will, I will, Birdie!" I answered, between my sobs, for I could feel how anxious she was growing.

And then she kissed me, and I knew how happy I had made her, for she fell into a peaceful slumber, her hand clasped in mine; and I, watching, for her sake, subduing my grief, whilst the feathered songsters sang on in the swaying trees, until even they were quiet, the whispering leaves alone rustling in the twilight.

In the days that followed my father discovered the truth; they could not keep it from him longer; and when the end came—which it did shortly after—his grief was terrible to see. It was then, the night Birdie died, that he had been with her all the day, for no entreaty would move him from her side, the while the food they brought him was taken away untouched. He had pillowed her head on his breast, even at the last hoping against hope that she would be spared to him, until a silence more than earthly crept around him; and in the stillness, which had till then filled the room, he felt one greater—it was the stillness of death. Birdie, his girl-wife, the love of his middle age, had passed away in his arms! And still he remained, the lifeless clay growing cold and stiff on his broad shoulder.

"Come away, papa, dear," I said; for nurse had approached now, and lifted the body, so as to lay it down that she might close the dead eyes.

"Yes, yes," he said, looking at me in a stupefied, dazed way; and then allowing me to lead him unresistingly from the room.

He remained thus for some time, looking vacantly around, as if unable to realize his great sorrow, until on the appearance of Doctor Clowes it apparently returned to his mind; and then, with a deep groan, he buried his head in his hands, whilst hot scalding tears oozed from between his fingers—holy, blessed tears which had saved his reason!

CHAPTER III.

A few days later and Birdie was laid to rest, but not in the family vault within the chancel, from the painted window of which, just behind the altar the rays of the morning sun would throw his beams, softened by the coloured glass, on the tessellated floor, but

just without—beneath a tree where the branches drooped low, until they kissed the soft green grass covering her grave, and the birds would sing her requiem in the branches overhead!

Roses were planted around beneath their shelter by my father's own hands, for he considered the ground where she lay too sacred for a stranger's tread; and then iron palisades parted it from the rest. And after a few weeks most had forgotten the Vicar's child-wife, save the Vicar himself.

And so the years passed on, my father growing old more rapidly than they; and little Birdie—for we had named her after her dead mother—quickly budding into womanhood.

"How like she is to my poor girl, Gertie!" my father would say, when together we often discussed the merits of our pet.

Mabel and Ella had long since married, and I might have done, but the promise I had given to the dead prevented me; and the first pang over—for it was not without the sacrifice of a true man's love that I remained single—I became resigned, feeling even happier than if I had gratified my own wish, determining in the future to seek my happiness in the welfare of my baby sister, as I always called her, although she was now in her seventeenth year.

"I am sure, dear Gertie, I no longer require a governess," she said to me one day, when we had been speaking respecting the merits of a middle-aged lady who had offered to replace Miss Marston, she having left to be married.

She had advanced to where I was sitting, after the former had been bowed from the room on a promise that she should hear from me when I had received a reply from the lady whom she had named as referee; and then throwing herself at my feet, so as to rest against my knee, Birdie lifted her eyes, beautiful as her mother's, to mine.

"I could not endure an old woman, Gertie," she said. I smiled, for I was no longer young, and to her doubtless appeared very aged indeed.

I suppose she read my thoughts, for she lifted her arms, the lace of her sleeve falling back, displaying them in all their rounded beauty, when clasping them round my neck, she drew me down until her lips met mine.

"I don't mean you dear, dear Gertie! You are not old, and if you were as ancient as Methuselah I should love you just the same."

After that of course, as usual, my pet carried her point, and it was agreed that she should receive instruction in music, which she dearly loved, from a master, who had been recommended by one of the county families, the while she should pursue her other studies, assisted by my superior knowledge. Papa was delighted with this arrangement; he would see more of his sunbeam (as he called her), he said, than when a governess was in constant attendance.

Signore Palezzi was, therefore interviewed and engaged to give my darling a lesson twice a week. His terms were decidedly extravagant, for we were not rich, but my father never demurred respecting anything which would advance the interests of Birdie, and would have agreed to have given double the sum he asked had she wished it.

Doubtless the middle-aged lady was disappointed when she received my letter informing her that, other arrangements having been made, her services would not be required, but so it was, and a few days after the Italian came to give his first lesson.

He was the usual type of foreigner, a little above the usual height, with supple limbs, and a form lithe and graceful, whilst his face was a study, such as Raphael would have loved to portray. It was perfect, with such eyes as I had never before seen save on the canvas, dark velvet eyes, the one moment melting and sad beneath the influence of the heavenly strains, which no human fingers had before his caused to sound from our piano, not one of the most modern, and the next frothing over with delight, as a merry thought passed through



[PAULINE'S EXPLANATION.]

"I believe, dear, that Fernlea is haunted; but I don't say whether by the spirits of the dead, or by the evil passions of the living. Anyway, little Nita will never get well in the house where she lost her nurse so strangely."

"I will go over to-morrow, Karl, and bring the child back, unless her mother forbids."

But, contrary to the doctor's expectation, Lady Julia was most gracious, and Nita returned with her hostess—a very pale and hollow-eyed Nita, one who seemed hardly able to think, and who wore a heavy black dress, edged with crepe.

"I belonged to Ronald," she whispered timidly to Mrs. Arnold; "and I got mother to let me wear this for his sake. You won't mind?"

Mrs. Arnold kissed her.

"Wear what you like, childie; and do as you please. We only want to make you happy."

"I shall never be happy again!"

"My dear, do you think he would wish that? I know something of Ronald Yorke—enough to remember him as one of the most generous men I ever met. Do you think he would wish you to spend your whole life in mourning because he has been taken from you?"

Nita sighed.

"He was all I had!"

"And he deserved the warmest love of a girl's heart. But, Natalie, you must not spend your whole life in weeping. I don't wonder that you mourn him, but there is comfort for you. It is something to have been chosen by such a man—to have such a lover to remember!"

"Yes," said Nita, slowly. "When I am far away in the convent it will be something to remember. At least, I shall have loved!"

"Dear child, you will not go to a convent! If everyone who was disappointed in love became a nun, there would not be convents enough to hold them. You have work to do in the world!"

Nita settled down very soon in the doctor's

house. She was treated just a little as an invalid, but only enough to give an excuse for making much of her.

Everyone took to the sweet, gentle girl, whose pathetic story moved all hearts. And before she had been under his roof three days Dr. Arnold's mind was made up.

"Molly," he said to his wife, "I will hear your opinion afterwards—first listen to mine. That child is no more insane than I am."

"And she has not the least tendency to mania," put in Mrs. Arnold. "I have watched her carefully. She is quiet, gentle, collected, calm. These are not the qualities of a girl likely to go out of her mind. I have never seen her even excited."

"Nor I."

"Of course you will tell Lady Julia?"

"I shall tell her nothing till the month's end. She promised Nita to us for a month. When that is over, we will see."

She was a good wife. She never asked his reasons. She felt a secret consciousness that he distrusted Lady Julia, but she knew he would have told her if he had wished her to know, and she was content to wait until his confidence came unsought.

It was a very simple household—two servants and a boy, a man to drive the brougham and look after the garden, which was the glory of Mrs. Arnold's heart.

Nita, too, loved the beautiful lawn and leafy walks. There was a rustic arbour some way from the house, where she would take a book or piece of work and sit for hours.

One day, when she had been at Monkton nearly a week, it chanced that Mrs. Arnold and her girls were going to a bazaar for some local charity. It was thought too fatiguing an expedition for Nita. Besides, her grief for Ronald was too keen for her to enjoy sight-seeing. She said at once she would stay at home. She could spend the afternoon quite contentedly in the garden, and perhaps the children might have tea with her in the arbour,

a proposal which delighted the three fair-haired mites who made up the nursery establishment.

Not one idea of harm came to Mrs. Arnold; even the doctor saw nothing to cause alarm.

Nita was not at all averse to solitude. She could be as happy alone in the grounds as in the heat and bustle of the bazaar. And yet from that simple arrangement sprang a world of confusion, doubt, and sorrow.

When Mrs. Arnold drove off Nita was strolling slowly down the garden to her favourite seat.

A good hour later the nurse went to see how the young lady was getting on, and at what hour she should bring the children to the arbour—but Nita was gone!

Bewildered, the old woman thought Miss Daventry must be ill, and have gone back to the house. She was hurrying there in search of her, when she caught sight of a slip of paper lying on the ground.

It was unfolded, and the servant who had lived with the doctor's wife for years saw no treachery to her mistress in reading the few straggling lines,—

"DEAREST MRS. ARNOLD,—Don't think me ungrateful, but my dear old nurse has sent for me. Janet is ill, and wants me. I could not refuse to go to her."

Nurse Giddings wished her master or Mrs. Arnold were at home. She was no gossip, but she had heard of the mysteries of Fernlea, and it seemed to her that if Nita Daventry had indeed gone at the bidding of Janet Dent, she was likely to share her perils.

With a strangely solemn face she walked back to the house, and chanced to see the doctor entering it.

In a moment she had put the paper in his hand, and told her story.

The physician must have had some strange suspicions of his own, for his ejaculation was,—

"Heaven help the poor child! She is lost!"
(To be continued.)



"I WAS TO TAKE THE MARCHESA AS MY BRIDE," SIGNOR PALEZZI SAID."

NOVELETTE.]

BIRDIE.

—:—

CHAPTER I.

A LARGE white house, its many windows glistening like diamonds in the sun, the lower ones peeping out from amid the green and red of the trailing roses which, in summer time, grew over the entrance extending each side to the extreme corner, around which a stray spray would break from its band of cloth which attached it to the wall, to hang listlessly on the other side.

Around the large space of gravel in front a shrubbery ran, divided by the large iron gates opening on the highway, which it had been planted intentionally to hide, not so much from those within as to obstruct the view of those without, chiefly consisting of labourers going to and fro from their daily toil on the neighbouring farms, their owners and the clergy of the surrounding villages being the chief society in Munford, where "The White House" was situated.

The Squire, who was my mother's father, lived in the Hall, not a mile distant, and in the bright summer-tide we could see from the top windows of the other, which was our home, the blue smoke rise, twisting and curling from over the deep green of the trees which surrounded it in the distance.

But he was dead at the time to which my memory carries me back; his son, my uncle, becoming proprietor of the ancient building dating back to the Crusades, whilst another uncle, owning the next largest estate in the parish—our family monopolised the greatest part, a fact which gained for us absolute sway amongst the inhabitants, who ever spoke of us as their young ladies, and the daughters of their Vicar.

My father had not always lived at Munford, and I believe I was not born there, but I never knew any other home; and all the joys and sorrows of my young life were centred within the iron gates, which, to my mind, enclosed the loveliest spot on the terrestrial globe. I could not conceive a sweeter garden than the one we could see from our drawing-room window, which looked out from the side, for the house ran far back, covering an immense space of ground, whilst that in which was grown all that was necessary to the kitchen, in the way of fruit and vegetables, was divided by a narrow lane, each side of which a wide deep ditch ran like a miniature moat, with a tiny wooden bridge across on which a green door opened, fastened by lock and key to avoid the depredations which would otherwise have been indulged in by the youth of the village.

An immense chestnut spread its branches over the centre of the grass-plot where the flower-beds were, whilst from one of its strong boughs a swing was fastened for our amusement, and in which, with my head resting against one of the ropes, I have so often sat dreaming of the future, with the song of the birds and the hum of the busy-bees around me, and the rays of the warm sun endeavouring to reach me amid the full branches swayed hither and thither by the summer breeze.

But it was to be before that time that my memory carries me back, when but a child of four years, my mother died, leaving, besides myself, another sister two years my junior, and a two-month old baby behind her.

It was in January, and ignorant of the loss I had sustained, with childish curiosity I watched from my nursery window the black line of carriages as they passed over the snow, which now thickly covered the ground, and then wended their way slowly and solemnly through the iron gates to the church in the distance, the deep tone of the bell falling at intervals on the wintry air, whilst I pressed my baby nose against the pane, straining my

eyes until the last one had disappeared, when, turning for the first time, I learnt from the girl who had attended me that they had gone to bury my dead mother.

At first I could not realize her meaning, but it soon revealed itself to me, and then my first grief came to me in all its intensity, and for days I would continue to cry for her who could hear me no more.

But the years passed on and she was soon forgotten, and we were as happy as children mostly are who have all they require of this world's goods, and are reared with the gentleness and kindness we received. It was thus time quickly fled, and at sixteen I was considered to have so far completed my studies that I had no further need to continue them in the school-room, where my two younger sisters, Mabel and Ella were yet pursuing theirs under the charge of Miss Karslake, a governess who was but a few years my senior.

She was a fair, tall girl of twenty-two, with eyes blue as the heavens, the faintest tinge of pink on her delicate cheek, whilst her lips were like a rosebud, and from the first my heart warmed towards her, so different in every way to the austere and middle-aged ladies who had preceded her, and during whose reign revolution was ever rife in the school-room; but which entirely subsided when Birdie Karslake held the reins of government, Mabel and Ella's high spirits becoming quiet and subdued beneath the influence of her power.

Whatever her friends could be thinking of, the ladies would say, to allow a beautiful young thing like her to go as governess in the house of a widower; and even the old house-keeper, who had been with us ever since our mother's death, held up her hands in astonishment, when Miss Faithfull's (who was the last one) successor presented herself.

Master must be mad, she insisted, for if he never spoke a word to the girl, the neighbours would be sure to concoct a thousand stories to

his discredit with regard to the beautiful governess, all of which came to my father's ears, without drawing anything further than a smile from him; and Birdie remained in our nest making us very happy, and outliving the ill-natured comments her beauty had evoked. And so the months passed into years, and people no longer talked of the Vicar, to whom they had some time since now given credit for better sense than to make love to a girl little older than his own daughters, when, least expected, the news that he was going to be married fell like a bomb-shell in their midst.

"That was what Birdie had been angling for, for the last two years, with her simpering ways and quiet looks," Miss Mathews, a lady of uncertain age, declared, who had, ever since our mother's death, looked upon herself as the most proper person to fill that mother's place, having been born and reared in the village, and knowing every man, woman and child in it. "Poor children!" she continued to the neighbour with whom she was conversing on the subject; and then she heaved a sigh in contemplation of the miseries and afflictions we were supposed to be subjected to when Birdie became Mrs. McFarlan.

"Ain't it ridiculous now," the woman replied, as when Miss Mathews was a good customer, she being a small trader in the parish. "A man old enough to be her father," and then she looked into the lady's face, as much as to say, "now if it had been you!" a look thoroughly understood by the other, who immediately made another small purchase, although the article was perfectly useless to her, when after a few more confidences, in which the Vicar's and Miss Mathews's names were freely handled she left the shop.

Cook gave notice shortly after, declaring she would not remain a day after Mrs. Frost the housekeeper left, whilst nurse was in a continual bath of tears, looking so far into futurity as to wonder how the master could think for one moment she would stay to nurse the children of a second wife, the housemaid alone espousing the cause of the poor girl, who, to avoid further scandal, determined to leave the White House until she returned to it as its mistress.

My father could not avoid being aware of how the rumour of his marriage had effected his parishioners towards him, but he took no more notice now than when, three years since, they had aired their opinion respecting his choice of a governess for his children. He shook hands as cordially with Miss Mathews, and increased rather than decreased his orders at the little shop, as though neither had ever uttered a word in disparagement of his conduct, whilst he failed to see the cold shoulder turned towards him, and the tone of reception was apparently lost on him.

I quickly overcame the jealous twinge which attacked me, when I first heard from Birdie herself how matters stood, but on Mabel and Ella the confession had a different effect.

"I shall almost hate her now, they both avowed, and I was not sorry, for her sake, when I saw the willowy form of our late governess, wrapped in a long sealskin cloak, the gift of my father, quit the house where I trusted, when she again returned with the spring flowers, she would bring with her a renewal of the love which was previously here.

"You will love me still Gertie," she said, as she at the last moment drew me towards her, and pressed a warm kiss on my lips, and in that moment, I forgot all but how beautiful, how loveable she looked, and threw my arms round her neck, returning passionately the kiss she had given. She then held out her hand to Mabel and Ella, but they merely touched the tips of her fingers, and I could see the tears well to her beautiful eyes as they drew back from the embrace she offered, and then she stepped into the carriage awaiting her, the sound of a dry sob not escaping my ears as she turned from us.

"How could you be so unkind," I said, when

for the last time having waved an adieu to her, I turned to my sisters, who, with their arms twined round each other's waists, were watching my movements. "We had only papa, and she has taken him from us," they replied with pouting lips, and they would have said more, had not the handle of the library door which opened on to the hall turned, and my father made his appearance.

He came up to where they stood, kindly telling them they had no time to lose if they would dress preparatory to dinner, and I knew he had heard nothing of what they had said, with that door closed between them, and he thinking but of the girl whom he had been watching from the window until the last glimpse of the carriage containing his jewel had passed from his view.

So Mabel and Ella moved from the spot, a sense of deep injustice clouding the usual brightness of their happy lives; and I ascended to my own room, wondering the while if my father had acted wisely in linking the fate of such a young as Birdie with his own.

But he evidently never thought for a moment but that his judgment in the choice of the bride he had selected was a correct one, and the disparity in their years was a point to which, I believe, he had never given a second consideration.

"Of course, Birdie's standing in this household will, on her return, be on an entirely different footing, Gertie," he told me, when, after dinner, he confided to me this question; "and I trust for my sake you will do all you can to contribute to her happiness, treating her in every respect as though she was your own mother."

"Scarcely that, papa," I smiled, as it occurred to me how absurd the notion was of looking on this girl, little older than myself, in the light of a parent; "but I will love her as an elder sister, never forgetting that she is your wife," I added.

"You are a good girl," he said, stroking my hair; and then I turned to join Mabel and Ella who were singing a duet in the drawing-room, leaving him in happy contemplation of his new-born happiness.

CHAPTER II.

A few weeks after, and a brother clergyman agreed to officiate in his stead the while he was absent on a short holiday, he told him; but I knew when he returned to Munford he would bring Birdie with him as his wife.

The winter had passed; even the cold easterly winds, so prevalent in spring, giving way to a soft, balmy breeze, and a bright sun filled the air with a genial warmth on the day we were led to expect the arrival of the newly-married pair.

I had so far succeeded in reconciling my sisters to what they considered their hard fate as to raise a smile on their gloomy countenances, when carriage wheels resounded on the gravel, and they rendered scarce a less warm welcome to our late governess than I did myself.

How pretty, I thought, she looked, a light tulle bonnet, as simple as it was elegant, resting on the bright gold of her rich hair, when, placing a tiny gloved hand in that of my father, she descended from the carriage. A flush of excitement showed itself on either cheek as she ascended the steps leading to the entrance hall, and there was a certain timidity in her movements, as though she feared the reception awaiting her; but seeing me the first to express my welcome, the tears started to her eyes, and then we were locked in each other's embrace.

"Birdie still, dear," she said, seeing, as she fancied, a hesitation on my part as to how I should address her, and then moving towards the others she held out a hand to each, looking so bewitching the while that even they could not resist the influence of her charm.

But after awhile even that failed to weigh against the feeling of jealousy my younger

sisters entertained towards her, which was not lessened by the teaching of Miss Mathews whenever they happened to come in contact with that lady.

"A simpering bit of a girl like that! I can't think how you young ladies can bear to see her filling the place left vacant by the death of your sainted mother!" she said, when on one occasion they met not long after Birdie's return; "but there, poor dears," she continued, "you were not old enough to know the loss you sustained when it pleased the Lord to take her," and Miss Mathews closed her eyes in saintly humility, "or you would never bring your tongue to call this one mamma."

"Oh, we never do that, Miss Mathews," Mabel replied; "she is so little older than ourselves, it would be absurd!"

"Absurd! I should think so. Now if your father had married a woman of his own age," and Miss Mathews paused, trusting they would see the point of her argument; "why no one would have said a word against it, for it is but natural that Mr. McFarlan should have married again." But the girls failed to understand her meaning, or even if they did, they decidedly gave preference to the choice already made than to have had such a person as her for their stepmother: so stating as an excuse that they must return quickly, for it was near upon dinner-time, they bade the maiden lady good bye.

There was in the months that succeeded no direct outbreak in the house circle at the White House, but my father could not fail to observe that a feeling of discontent had entered within, and I found it useless to endeavour to dispel that foolish jealousy which had taken so deep a hold of my sister's imagination that the attempt to make them cast smother from their minds only fanned the flame of the animosity they now nurtured towards their youthful stepmother.

"Oh! of course you take her part," they would say, "and we are always in the wrong, as we are with papa now. We will go as governesses ourselves, anything rather than stay here," they added, passionately, "Miss Mathews, everyone wonders we can remain to be snubbed as we are, and all because of her, until we hate her!"

We were seated in the drawing-room, the lamps had not been as yet lighted, for we preferred to sit by the open window to watch the bright crimson and gold of the setting sun from amid the deep green of the distant trees, until it gradually faded from view, leaving nought but the silver-gray of the clouds with their golden edges to tell where he had sunk to rest, and then the shadows of night fell over all.

"Miss Mathews is no friend of yours!" I answered, hotly, for I was sick of hearing her name so often brought forward; and then I rose with the intention of ringing for lights, when I fancied the door closed softly, but no one answering my question, "Who is there?" I concluded I was mistaken. I pulled the bell, and shortly after a servant entered with lights.

My father followed almost immediately, seemingly surprised to find us girls alone.

"Where is Birdie?" he asked.

"I thought she was with you," I answered.

"We have not seen her all the evening."

"Go and find her," he said, looking sharply towards my sisters, fearing, I knew, that they had, through some fresh unkindness, driven her from the room; but on my volunteering to seek her he made no further remark, only impatiently awaiting the solution of her absenting herself.

I was not away more than ten minutes I was sure, but before I returned he was calling me, and when I re-entered the drawing-room he looked up anxiously to see without my speaking first that something was amiss.

"What is it, Gertie?" he asked.

"She is in her own room, papa," I answered, "and—very—ill."

"Ill!" he exclaimed, "and all alone!" And then he rang the bell violently, giving

directions that a man from the stables should be sent at once for Dr. Clowes, when he followed me along the corridor leading to Birdie's room.

I had already ordered the housemaid not to leave her until my return; but she turned as he advanced towards the bed on which she lay, and I knew the signs of weeping apparent on her countenance was not caused so much from the pain she was suffering as from the unkind words uttered by Mabel which she had overheard.

"I did not intend to listen," she had told me; "but do not let your father know; it would only get them into trouble."

It was but a short distance to the doctor's residence, and within the hour he had arrived; but it was not until the grey of the early dawn came peeping within the closed blinds that he took his departure, and then a tiny sister was added to our fold—another link, as the others thought, to draw our father closer to his girl-wife and further from them.

"A pity it wasn't born dead," they said; but when on the second day Nurse excitedly displayed it to us as "the most beautiful baby she ever saw," they could not deny but that it was a sweet little thing, for it opened its pretty eyes, looking as though to crave the love they had determined to withhold from it.

One consolation they found was in its not being a boy, for in that case they felt sure our father would have made an idol of it; but as it was he took little or no notice of the tiny mite, even to Birdie's enlogiums on its beauty, saying he was not much of a judge of babies, but he supposed it was all right, and he would be better able to give an opinion after it had had a short time to grow; and as if anxious to do so quickly it fed and slept and slept and fed until dimples one could not resist displayed themselves in a marvellous way; and when he, after the third week, just touched its waxen cheek, the little mouth wreathed itself into its first smile, which won his heart in an instant.

The christening was to be deferred until Birdie's recovery, which was so slow, that although he had never expressed his fear, I knew papa was growing each day more anxious about her.

Baby was now a month old, and yet she had never left her room, the fatigue of being removed even to her couch apparently too much for her.

It was on one of these days, when, with Nurse's assistance, I had drawn her up to the open window, for it was a glorious evening in July, that she held my hand as I was about to move away.

"Don't go, Gertie," she said, "but sit down here, dear, by my side. I have so much to say to you, and—my time is not very long."

I took the seat she indicated, close by where the sweet honeysuckle was trained, filling the room with its fragrance. The glare of the midday sun had softened as its rays fell on the green grass, a gentle breeze amid the rustling leaves where the branches of the trees swayed to and fro, the only sound save the song of the feathered minstrels in their midst, and for a moment all seemed so peaceful, so calm, that a single thought of trouble never entered my imagination; but on her repeating the words I turned, and then, for the first time, the truth of what she said revealed itself to me. (Her stay would not be long here!) But it came to me so suddenly that for the moment I could not utter a word, and when I recovered myself sufficiently to speak lightly of her fears, I knew that she was aware they were shared by me equally as herself.

"No, dear," she returned, in reply to some remark I made as to their being groundless. "It is no use, Gertie, to deceive you or myself; I shall never be well again. Dr. Clowes has told me as much, and I begged of him not to say so to your father; but I think you love me, Gertie," she added, looking wistfully into my face with those wondrous blue eyes I

always thought so beautiful, but which appeared doubly so now.

"Love you, Birdie!" I replied, "even more than my own sisters. But you must not talk of going, dear—you so young, so beautiful!" and then I broke down. I could say no more, as, throwing myself on my knees by her side, I buried my face in her robe to stifle the sobs I could not control.

She passed her white transparent hand over my hair.

"Don't cry, Gertie," she said. "It is all for the best. Mabel and Ella do not like me, and I could not feel happy in the thought that I should come between them and their father. You don't think it was my wish to do so, do you, dear?" she continued; "for, indeed, it was not. I wanted so to love them as I love you, but they would not let me; and when I am gone, maybe they will think more kindly of me!"

She paused for a few moments then; a faint tinge of pink had dyed her cheek in her excitement, whilst a last ray of the sun, which was sinking lower and lower, rested on her golden hair like a halo around her; the white peignoir she wore hanging loosely over her figure, adding to the ethereal beauty, which even sickness was powerless to take from her.

"I want to give her to you, dear—my baby—Gertie—before I go," she added; and then she nervously awaited my reply, but I could only press her hand, I could not speak. "You will love her—be her mother? Tell me you will," she went on, "and I shall die happy!"

"I will, I will, Birdie!" I answered, between my sobs, for I could feel how anxious she was growing.

And then she kissed me, and I knew how happy I had made her, for she fell into a peaceful slumber, her hand clasped in mine; and I, watching, for her sake, subduing my grief, whilst the feathered songsters sang on in the swaying trees, until even they were quiet, the whispering leaves alone rustling in the twilight.

In the days that followed my father discovered the truth, they could not keep it from him longer; and when the end came—which it did shortly after—his grief was terrible to see. It was then, the night Birdie died, that he had been with her all the day, for no entreaty would move him from her side, the while the food they brought him was taken away untouched. He had pillowed her head on his breast, even at the last hoping against hope that she would be spared to him, until a silence more than earthly crept around him; and in the stillness, which had till then filled the room, he felt one greater—it was the stillness of death. Birdie, his girl-wife, the love of his middle age, had passed away in his arms! And still he remained, the lifeless clay growing cold and stiff on his broad shoulder.

"Come away, papa, dear," I said; for nurse had approached now, and lifted the body, so as to lay it down that she might close the dead eyes.

"Yes, yes," he said, looking at me in a stupefied, dazed way; and then allowing me to lead him unresistingly from the room.

He remained thus for some time, looking vacantly around, as if unable to realize his great sorrow, until on the appearance of Doctor Clowes it apparently returned to his mind; and then, with a deep groan, he buried his head in his hands, whilst hot scalding tears oozed from between his fingers—holy, blessed tears which had saved his reason!

CHAPTER III.

A FEW days later and Birdie was laid to rest, but not in the family vault within the chancel, from the painted window of which, just behind the altar the rays of the morning sun would throw his beams, softened by the coloured glass, on the tessellated floor, but

just without—beneath a tree where the branches drooped low, until they kissed the soft green grass covering her grave, and the birds would sing her requiem in the branches overhead!

Roses were planted around beneath their shelter by my father's own hands, for he considered the ground where she lay too sacred for a stranger's tread; and then iron palisades parted it from the rest. And after a few weeks most had forgotten the Vicar's child-wife, save the Vicar himself.

And so the years passed on, my father growing old more rapidly than they; and little Birdie—for we had named her after her dead mother—quickly budding into womanhood.

"How like she is to my poor girl, Gertie!" my father would say, when together we often discussed the merits of our pet.

Mabel and Ella had long since married, and I might have done, but the promise I had given to the dead prevented me; and the first pang over—for it was not without the sacrifice of a true man's love that I remained single—I became resigned, feeling even happier than if I had gratified my own wish, determining in the future to seek my happiness in the welfare of my baby sister, as I always called her, although she was now in her seventeenth year.

"I am sure, dear Gertie, I no longer require a governess," she said to me one day, when we had been speaking respecting the merits of a middle-aged lady who had offered to replace Miss Marston, she having left to be married.

She had advanced to where I was sitting, after the former had been bowed from the room on a promise that she should hear from me when I had received a reply from the lady whom she had named as referee; and then throwing herself at my feet, so as to rest against my knee, Birdie lifted her eyes, beautiful as her mother's, to mine.

"I could not endure an old woman, Gertie," she said. I smiled, for I was no longer young, and to her doubtless appeared very aged indeed.

I suppose she read my thoughts, for she lifted her arms, the lace of her sleeve falling back, displaying them in all their rounded beauty, when clasping them round my neck, she drew me down until her lips met mine.

"I don't mean you dear, dear Gertie! You are not old, and if you were as ancient as Methuselah I should love you just the same."

After that of course, as usual, my pet carried her point, and it was agreed that she should receive instruction in music, which she dearly loved, from a master, who had been recommended by one of the county families, the while she should pursue her other studies, assisted by my superior knowledge. Papa was delighted with this arrangement; he would see more of his sunbeam (as he called her), he said, than when a governess was in constant attendance.

Signora Palezzi was, therefore interviewed and engaged to give my darling a lesson twice a week. His terms were decidedly extravagant, for we were not rich, but my father never demurred respecting anything which would advance the interests of Birdie, and would have agreed to have given double the sum he asked had she wished it.

Doubtless the middle-aged lady was disappointed when she received my letter informing her that, other arrangements having been made, her services would not be required, but so it was, and a few days after the Italian came to give his first lesson.

He was the usual type of foreigner, a little above the usual height, with supple limbs, and a form lithe and graceful, whilst his face was a study, such as Raphael would have loved to portray. It was perfect, with such eyes as I had never before seen save on the canvas, dark velvet eyes, the one moment melting and sad beneath the influence of the heavenly strains, which no human fingers had before his caused to sound from our piano, not one of the most modern, and the next frothing over with delight, as a merry thought passed through

his mind; and I could not help imagining how terrible they could be in anger, but of that we were unable to judge. To us he was politeness itself, even in conformity with our English manners, as if in sympathy throwing in the slightest tone of reserve in his bearing towards us.

"Well, how do you like him, Birdie?" I asked, as the first lesson over Signor Palezzi bowed himself out of the room, and we imagined, for we could not hear his footsteps on the carpet, how he went tripping down the stairs to where his vehicle awaited him at the hall door.

"I like him so much, Gertie!" she answered, twisting herself round on the stool where he had left her by the piano. "I know I shall get on gloriously; and oh! if I can only play and sing as he does, I feel I could love him directly!"

The words were only spoken in jest; but they say coming events cast their shadows before them. However, I looked up, she in all her youth and beauty a very picture before me, and somehow a cold shiver seemed to pass through my frame.

I don't know, but I suppose I looked strange, for, jumping up, Birdie threw her arms round my neck and covered me with kisses, whilst she let her beautiful face rest against mine.

"Why, you silly old Gertie," she said, "anyone would suppose I had fallen in love, ran away, and got married to the handsome Signor all at once, and you had just heard of it to see your expression of alarm;" and I laughed, too, for I thought how foolish she must think me.

But, as Birdie said she should, she improved wonderfully under the Signor's teaching; her fresh, young voice, clear as a bell, falling on the ear as the ripples of a fairy brook.

A new piano was a birthday present papa made her when she was seventeen. It was a splendid instrument, and Signor Palezzi's judgment on it was most satisfactory; but after a while it seemed to me Birdie failed to take the same interest in her practice as before; and on one or two occasions, when entering the room suddenly I found her, the piano open, but her face was buried in her hands, whilst the ivory keys remained untouched.

"Are you not well, Birdie?" I asked, when on one occasion I thus surprised her, as, advancing to where she sat, I laid my hand on her sunny head.

"Well! yes, dear," she answered, starting. "How you made me jump, Gertie, only my head aches a little;" and then she commenced a symphony, but I could see the tears slowly well to her beautiful eyes, until they rested on the long deep lashes, to tumble the next moment down her rounded cheek.

"It is more than a mere headache which makes you like this, my child," I said, drawing her towards me, for she could not play, the notes appearing all blurred and dim before her; but she only smiled through her tears, declaring there was really nothing, the while I knew well she was hiding something from me—a something which for a moment trembled on her lips, as she weighed in her mind whether she should tell me or no.

But she did not, the rest of the evening, as I thought, making an effort that the gaiety she assumed should appear natural.

Ella had called in the afternoon, for she lived but a short distance from the old home, and whilst listening to the wonders said and done by my little nephew, youngest of four, I gave no further heed to Birdie, who had taken the opportunity to slip from the room to take a stroll in the garden, as the servant of whom I inquired afterwards told me.

It was a lovely summer's evening; the sun had long since sunk to rest behind the grey clouds, and quite a little army of gnats were dancing in the soft, cool air, a sign of continued fine weather. Ella said after she had come to an end of her troubles, which she had been confiding to me with regard to Bobby's measles, which, not being content with attack-

ing Bobby alone, had spread amongst the entire household, ever to the under-nurse, who was through it obliged to leave.

"This is the best time of the day, I think," I said, "and as you are not going home till tomorrow let us join Birdie in the garden; the child must be lonely."

"I shall be only too glad," Ella answered; so we tripped down the stairs beneath the rose-covered porch to where the path led round the corner to the flower-beds; but we walked all round the large grass plot, down the trellis-walk, where the honeysuckle grew, and then behind, where an artificial rockery divided this from a smaller garden, but no sign of Birdie.

"She must have gone in," Ella said, turning to a path, on one side of which grew a high evergreen hedge between it and the wide ditch on the other; but just then a whisper of subdued voices reached our ears, and the glimmer of a white dress was visible in the twilight.

Ella was the first to see it.

"Why, it is Birdie," she said, "in the lane there;" but, before I could take in her meaning, the white dress had disappeared.

"Who can be with her?" she continued, "for I am sure I heard a man's voice;" but, perhaps, it is papa," she added, although she knew quite well that poor papa was fast asleep in his arm-chair when we sauntered out.

Whether my face betrayed me I cannot tell, but I felt my heart flutter, for I remembered what had passed only that afternoon when I found Birdie bathed in tears; but I made no reply further than to saunter onwards towards where the little bridge led to the gate which opened on to the lane. I did so, hoping she might enter the house before us, and I might be able to make Ella believe she was mistaken; but my good genius forsook me, for just as we reached the spot Birdie entered the garden.

She had thrown a scarlet wrap over her head, but, notwithstanding, her face bore a white frightened expression when she saw us.

"We have been looking everywhere for you, Birdie!" Ella said. "Whatever made you wander up that miserable lane alone at this time of night?"

She laid such a stress on the *alone* that the girl started, and in the dim light I fancied the colour flew to her face, but it might have been fancy, for the next moment she had recovered herself.

"To gather these," she said. "Are they not lovely?" And she held out a group of wild roses she had in her hand.

"The roses are pretty, but beware of the thorns, Birdie," my sister answered; and then we simultaneously turned to re-enter the house as the sound of wheels fell on our ears; and notwithstanding that Birdie urged us not to stay, for it was growing chilly, Ella seemed determined to see who it was. Vehicular traffic in our quiet village at that time when the farmers and their hands had mostly retired to rest, or were hanging over their gates enjoying the cool evening air, and their pipe at the same time, was so uncommon an occurrence that I could say nothing to her satisfying her curiosity, therefore telling her we would leave her to follow on, Birdie and I re-entered to the house.

"Well, I hope you were repaid for your trouble. Who was the stranger?" I asked, when after a few minutes she joined us.

"You would never guess, Gertie, if you tried till doomsday," she replied. "Perhaps Birdie could," and she looked in her direction, but the girl was seemingly too occupied with her music which she had commenced sorting to heed her question. So she added, "It was that horrid little music teacher, Signor Palezzi, of all people in the world, and at this late hour."

"Returning most likely from Lady Travers's," I said. "I know he goes there late."

"And returns to Wingford-station by this, the longest route," she replied, sarcastically, looking the while at Birdie, who had for the

moment raised her eyes—I fancied in gratitude to mine.

"I did not know that you knew Signor Palezzi, Ella?" my father ventured, who heard and saw nothing further than what he considered was a bit of spite on Ella's part that he should have anyone so expensive to instruct her stepister, when Miss Long had been considered a sufficient artiste for her tuition.

"Why, papa, it was through Lady Travers that I heard he was teaching Birdie, and May, showing such a taste for music, I persuaded my husband to let her study under him also; but notwithstanding that I love his music, I hate the man, who I believe to be a thorough bad one," and then she whispered the remainder. But notwithstanding that the whole sentence had been conveyed in an undertone, and the girl at the piano had let her fingers rest lightly on the keys, I knew that not a word had escaped her, for as the last expression of hatred was uttered she inadvertently struck a wrong chord, and then pleading fatigue rose from the instrument.

"I will go to bed now, Gertie dear," she said. "I don't think I am very well," and then I kissed her warm cheek, loving her in that moment far more, for I knew she was in trouble when watching her with a heavy heart as my father gathered her in his arms. Ella bid her a cold good-night, and then the door closed behind her. And long after, when all the household was wrapped in slumber, I lay thinking—thinking.

Thinking of what? And the old adage running in my head. "Coming events cast their shadows before them."

CHAPTER IV.

The next day Signor Palezzi came as usual to give his lesson, and I had made up my mind to remain in the room during the time, which had lately far exceeded the hour to which it was limited; but my intention was frustrated, a parochial case of some import calling me away before I had taken up my station twenty minutes; but after disposing of the interruption I was about to return to the drawing-room, when, on consulting my watch, I found I had been absent considerably longer than I had thought.

"Has Signor Palezzi left?" I asked of the parlourmaid, who I met on the landing leading to the room where I had left them, concluding, from hearing no sound, that such was the case.

"I don't think so, miss," the girl answered when, passing her, I proceeded towards the door.

They were still seated by the instrument, but I could not fail to see that on making my appearance, the Signor hastily released his pupil's hand, the while the hot blood dyed her face from throat to brow.

"I thought you had departed Signor?" I said, as I failed to hear the music.

"Not so, Miss McFarlane?" he queried, raising his shoulders, as if in astonishment that I should have been deaf to sounds which never existed.

"I made most do mooseek myself," he continued, running his fingers over the keys, "For de Signorita ees no well, and she has no speerit for de same," and then he let those velvety eyes of his rest on Birdie until the colour again mounted to her forehead.

"The hour has long expired, Birdie? you had better go to your room, and lie down till dinner, dear," I said.

She rose at once, thankful as I thought to get away, merely saying her head ached horribly, when holding out her hand to the Signor, she bade him good-bye, and a moment after the door closed behind her.

He would have followed her example, glad as she, I thought, to get from my presence, had I not begged him to stay.

"You were walking in the lane with my sister last evening, Signor Palezzi," I began,

after having motioned him to be seated, dashing into the subject at once, and then waiting to watch the effects of my words.

At first he seemed dumbfounded, and weighed in his mind whether to deny or admit the truth of my assertion.

Perhaps he thought it useless to do the first, so accepted the inevitable, and told me it was so.

"De Signorita did take one little walk, when deir paths did meet, and he did stay one moment for to weesh Mess Birdie a vera good evening, and den he did go on to de station, was it wrong?" he asked. "If so he did ask one thousand pardons," and he bowed almost to my feet, the while he placed his hand on his heart, to assure me a thought of wrong was the farthest from his mind.

"I cannot say so, provided the meeting was an accidental one," I answered, "but you must excuse me saying, Signor, the lateness of the hour, made the fact appear strange that you should be so late in the neighbourhood."

He looked at me then, an air of injured innocence passing over his handsome face, the while I thought I could detect the slightest suspicion of a smile lurking around beneath his heavy moustaches, and leaving a ray of mischief to escape from his splendid eyes. But the next moment all my doubts had fled, and I even apologised for the injustice I thought I had done him.

"You must forgive me Signor," I said, "but Birdie is so young, and owing to the fact that I am in the position of mother to her, it makes me jealous of any harm reaching her."

"With respect to me, Mess McFarlane, you need have not one moment's uneasiness. Mess Birdie es one vera booteful young lady, but Signor Palezzi has one conscience; an while he lives he will act as a man of honour."

He had drawn himself up to his full height as these sentiments escaped him, and then placing his hand on his heart, made the best of melodramatic bows.

A short time after he was gone, leaving me in anything but a satisfactory frame of mind, wavering as I was 'twixt the advisability of mentioning my doubts to Birdie, or allowing things to go on as if I had no idea, no thought, that she would deceive me.

My darling did not make her appearance until dinner, and, notwithstanding she had exerted every effort to erase the sign of tears, I could not fail to see that she had been weeping.

Such a miserable meal I never sat down to before, during which I had to do all the talking, and then was forced to lapse into silence, unable as I was to continue a solitary conversation farther.

"You must excuse me, Gertie!" papa said, "but I feel very ill, child, and seem to have no strength to talk."

"I am so sorry, dear!" I answered. "Have you been over-fatiguing yourself?"

"I don't think so!" he replied; but scarcely had he finished the sentence when a sudden faintness seized him, and I had but time to rush to his assistance when he became as one lifeless, falling back in his chair.

To bathe his hands and forehead with water, aided by Birdie, was the work of a moment, and when he was sufficiently recovered we laid him on the sofa. But although he revived for awhile, we knew he was far worse than he cared to acknowledge, and two days after he was confined to his bed, and Dr. Clowes in attendance.

It was then that I gave no further thought to Signor Palezzi, my mind too fully occupied in the sick room to pay any attention to other matters.

I knew the music-lessons were given, for I heard the piano; but the door was kept closed, fearing to disturb the slumbers of the invalid. It was on one of these days—papa had been ill now three weeks—that Birdie came to me, for I had snatched a few moments from the watch I had kept so long by his bedside.

"Can I speak to you now, Gertie?" she asked. "Nurse is with papa, isn't she?"

"Yes, dear!" I answered, stroking her soft hair, for she had set herself in her favourite place on a stool by my feet. "Is it anything very important?" and I smiled down at the childish face uplifted to mine, and which had become so rosy-red in those few minutes.

"Yes!" she stammered, "dear, dear Gertie!" she went on. "You won't be very angry, will you, and her eyes looked so pitiful I could only stoop and kiss her in reply.

"I don't suppose it is anything very dreadful my darling!" I said.

She was silent then, nervously plucking at a tassel which adorned her dress, the colour deepening on her fair skin the while.

"I don't think so, Gertie!" she answered, after awhile; "but I am afraid you will be very cross," and her lids, with their deep fringes, drooped until they swept her cheek.

"What is it, Birdie?" I said, impatiently. "If you have anything to tell me you had better do so at once, as any moment I may be called to papa's room."

She covered her face with her hands then, and I saw the tears well through her fingers. In an instant I repeated that I had spoken, as I thought, harshly.

"Never mind, darling!" I said, "I did not mean to be unkind," and then I lifted her from her lowly position and nestled her head on my bosom.

"Now, tell me all about it, dear!" I continued.

"I know it was wicked to deceive you, Gertie!" she answered; "but I loved him so much, and he said you would part us, that you would never let me see him any more, and so—and so, I told him I would be his wife! and one day I met him. We went a long way, and—and were married!"

"Married!" I exclaimed, in my astonishment, almost throwing her from me.

She was on her feet in a moment, regretting, I could see it in her face, that she had confided to me the story which she had told me between her sobs, in disjointed phrases. The colour had fled from her cheeks, and she had become deadly pale, with a look of defiance on her countenance I had never seen before.

"I am no longer a child, Gertie!" she said, and then, without another word, she swept from the room.

"No longer a child!" I repeated, my heart breaking the while. This, this, for all the tender love and care I had lavished on her! And then my strength gave way, and I sobbed out the grief I could no longer control.

"And who was the man to whom she had given her young life?" I asked. Antonio Palezzi! Yes, Antonio Palezzi! who, but a few weeks since had spoken to me of honour—honour! To creep as a serpent into our paradise; and in my agony I fell on my knees, and cursed him who had brought such trouble to our hitherto happy home.

How long I remained thus I could not tell. The shadows of evening were fast creeping over the room, I alone remaining unconscious of the gathering gloom. As in a dream I heard my father's bell, and felt unable to stir. A thought, a regret I had never felt till now, I could not resist passing through my mind; that it was for this I had sacrificed my youth, my lover, all that was dearest, and this was the end; until in my fancy I conjured up from each darkening corner the face of the Italian, jeering at me in his triumph, and then the touch of a human hand recalled me to myself, and I lifted my head to see Birdie by my side.

She was still wearing the white dress she had worn that afternoon, and the indistinct light of the dying day was just sufficient to show me the face I loved so fondly, looking so beautiful, as I thought, in that moment that she was going from me.

"I could not go, Gertie, until you had told me you had forgiven me. Not for the step I have taken, dear, but for the unkind way in which I spoke to you—you who have been so good to me. I did not wish to have left until I knew papa was better, but perhaps it

is better I should do so; but you won't tell him just yet, Gertie; will you, dear?" she sobbed. "Not until he is strong enough to know that his sunbeam has left for ever."

What I should have replied I can't say, but the door opening suddenly, I roused myself in a moment, Birdie assisting me to my feet, as the housemaid entered the room.

"Oh! miss, do come at once!" she said. "Nurse says she has been ringing the bell you told her to for the last half-hour, and master has got another fit, and she is so frightened."

I required no further incentive to dash aside my tears, and but a few minutes elapsed when I was by my father's bedside.

But the sands of life were quickly running out, Dr. Clowes telling me it it were possible to summon my sisters not a moment must be lost; but Ella alone lived within distance to enable her to join us, as we were assembled around his bed.

"Take care of her, Gertie," were his last words, as after bidding us all good bye, he laid Birdie's hand in mine, and then the film of death gathered over his eyes, and as he passed away I thanked Heaven he had never known the sorrow which I was left to bear alone.

Palezzi's name was never uttered in the days which followed, he even displaying too much respect to our feelings than to intrude upon our sorrow, alone sending by the servant who told him the sad news a message of condolence and then leaving, although I knew it was hard for him to do so without one moment in which he could have nestled to his bosom the lovely head of his young bride, sympathising with her in her distress.

But even with her he seemed to have passed from her memory in the contemplation of this heavy sorrow, and not until we had laid the beloved remains in the same grave which held his child-wife beneath the drooping willow was the subject referred to.

Ella had returned to her home, and we two alone occupied the White House, which appeared to grow more gloomy each day as the autumn advanced, until I almost wished she had left one or two of her children to enliven us, and I began to anticipate the return of the Signor with delight; even his music I thought, would at least cheer us, as I had, on consideration, deemed it wiser to bow to the inevitable than to hold out against what now could not be helped, so had agreed that Birdie should write and tell him to make my home his until he had provided one for them both.

"How strange Antonio does not write," Birdie said, when three days had elapsed without bringing any reply.

"Very," I answered, rather nettled that he should thus have treated what I looked upon as an act of concession on my part. "Surely there will be a letter to-morrow!"

But to-morrow came with the same result, I conjuring up in my mind the while all kinds of horrors, and Birdie's sweet face becoming whiter as each morning passed, and no letter.

"Oh! Gertie, what shall I do?" she asked, the tears welling to her beautiful eyes. "I am sure he is ill, and cannot write. I can't bear it—indeed I can't. I must go myself to-morrow if we hear nothing then."

I consented that she should do so if the morning brought no news, and I thought she appeared a trifle happier, although I could see how dreadfully long the hours seemed to her with that dreadful fear gaining hold on her imagination.

We were seated in the drawing-room, looking out on the big tree, beneath which we had so often swung in the days of our childhood, its leaves now turning red and yellow with autumn tints. And I was wondering where my next home would be (for the White House, there being no vicarage in the parish, would be required by the new incumbent), when the housemaid entered the room bear-

ing on a silver salver a card which she brought to me.

It was a lady's, and in answer to my question, being told that the lady herself wished to see me, I gave orders that she should be shown into the library.

The next moment I arose with the intention of following, hoping that Birdie had not seen the name of the stranger, hiding the card, as I thought, from her sight; but, in rising, it must have fallen, for it fluttered to the ground, and before I could recover it she held it in her hand.

"Madame Palezzi, Gertie!" she ejaculated. "What can it mean?" and then she clung to me, as a horrible fear filled her mind.

"His mother, dear," I answered, not knowing how to meet those sad eyes uplifted to mine. "Perhaps he is not well, nothing serious, and she has come to explain why he has not written;" and then I tore myself away from her, for I could not bear the questioning of that mute appeal with that terrible dread taking possession of me; and as the door closed behind me I could hear her sobbing out a grief she appeared to foresee.

CHAPTER V.

"Miss Macfarlane, I believe?"

It was the stranger who thus spoke, when I entered the room, and she had risen from the seat she had occupied awaiting my presence.

I bowed an assent, a great weight being lifted from my heart as my eyes rested on the lady, who, at my request, resumed her former position.

She was a woman past the meridian of life, the worn face, which could never have been handsome even in its first youth, failing to hide its wrinkles beneath the deep layer of rouge and powder with which it was covered, whilst giving to the eyes a strange yellow appearance, totally in variance with the girlish air she assumed.

One glove was removed, displaying a white shrivelled hand, the fingers of which were covered to the knuckles with rings, in which the most valuable stones sparkled.

"I trust, Madame Palezzi," I commenced, "that it is no unforeseen trouble which has been the cause of your presence here—that Signor Antonio is not ill?"

"Oh, dear no!" she replied, with a laugh, which grated on my ears, and made her look almost fiendish through her paint, "something far more important than his illness would be has compelled me to intrude on your time."

I bowed again, leading her to understand I was ready to listen to the cause of her visit the while she appeared to take a delight in tantalising me by not entering on the subject, the excitement of my feelings, which I could ill-restrain, apparently affording her the most excoiating pleasure.

All this time I was thinking of Birdie, knowing how much the suspense of awaiting even the worst was causing her to suffer, and this woman evidently reading my thoughts and torturing me accordingly by her reticence.

"My time being valuable, Madame Palezzi," I at last said, with impatience, "you must excuse my asking you to convey, without further delay, the purport of your visit, which I can alone conjecture to be with reference to your son."

No sooner had the words left my lips than I was aware of the mistake I had made, for even beneath her rouge I could see the colour mount to her temples, whilst her yellow eyes shone with a dangerous fire.

"My son!" she hissed forth. "I can only conclude, Miss Macfarlane, you have a desire to insult me, to hide the shame of your sister, who has allowed herself to become the mistress of a married man!"

The abuse she showered upon us both was lost upon me as it came pouring forth from between her false teeth, that one word alone resounding in my ears, she the while telling

me how she had found it all out, and then throwing at my feet the letters which my darling, in her innocence, had penned to Antonio her husband.

At first, in my heart, I cursed him, and then when I lifted my eyes to this woman and read his fate in her cold, pitiless face I felt a gleam of pity pass over the anger which had at first filled my breast against him.

His wife! I thought. This creature, old and withered, to whom the name of love was mockery, to whom even the title of mother would have deprived it of its sanctity! Could it be true, or was it but the phantasm of some horrible dream?

I arose then, like one in a nightmare, the birds singing their evening hymns in the branches without coming to me as the voices of angels, and I powerless to stir from the spot where, like a demon, this woman stood before me, that laugh again resounding in my ears, until she held out her hand, and with a superhuman effort I roused myself to avoid her touch.

I heard the rustle of her dress when, in answer to my summons, a servant showed her out; and then, as the door closed behind her, the sound aroused me to a sense of my situation, and baring my face in my hands I sobbed aloud in the agony of my grief, in that moment breathing a prayer of thankfulness to Heaven that my father had never known this great sorrow.

How long I remained thus I cannot tell. I knew it must be growing late, for the birds' songs had almost ceased, and the shadows were creeping softly around, filling each nook and corner with fancied forms, and my imagination had become so distended that I almost shrieked when a soft hand was laid upon my shoulder.

"Little mother!"

I looked up then; it was Birdie's voice, and the endearing title was the one she ever gave me when she thought she had caused me sorrow.

I tried to hide the traces of the tears I had shed, but notwithstanding the waning light, even in the dying day, they could not escape her observation; and then, in the deep gloom which seemed to gather all at once around us, I told her the story of her wrong.

At first she would not believe, tearing herself passionately from my embrace, and in the moment of her awakening from her love-dream even accusing me of a desire to separate her from her lover; but the pain depicted on my face, even in that dim light, seemed to recall her to a sense of the injustice she had done me, and the next moment she had thrown herself in my arms, letting her head, with its wealth of golden hair, rest on my shoulder, sobbing out her grief as she had done in the days gone by, when she had come to me with her child troubles.

"You will take me away, Gertie?" she said. "If I stay here I shall go mad!"

"Yes, dear," I answered; "we will go abroad for awhile, and in new scenes forget all. It seems very dreadful now, Birdie," I continued, stroking the bright, soft hair, "but in a short time my darling will be herself again. You are so young, dearest, and the world is wide."

She looked up at me reproachfully, and then she bid me tell her of his wife.

"Do you think he really loves her, Gertie?" she asked.

I had not told her then how impossible I knew it was, the idea of love in connection with that painted, aged woman, rather desiring her to harbour the feeling that her rival was young and handsome as herself.

"People do not always marry for love, Birdie," I answered. "But that she is his wife she has given me indisputable proofs of."

"Yes, yes!" she cried, excitedly; "and I—Gertie, I—was his—"

But I would not let her finish the sentence; it seemed sacrilege to apply such a name to one so pure and innocent as she, so I placed

my hand across her pretty mouth, pressing her to my bosom as though she was an infant.

The next day she collected all the presents he had made her, which she put in a box, together with the golden ring he had placed on her finger but a few weeks since.

"Don't direct it to that address, Birdie," I said, for I saw she was writing the same where Madame Palezzi had intercepted her letters.

"I know of no other, Gertie," she answered, looking up, sadly.

I advanced to where she was sitting with the box before her.

"Would you not like to see him once before we leave England, Birdie?" I asked.

She turned to me then, a gleam of gratitude and love shining from her beautiful eyes, suffused as they were with unshed tears, and I knew how thankful she was that I had said this.

"Dear little mother!" she answered, smothering my hand, which she had captured, with kisses; and so we agreed that an advertisement should be inserted in the *Times* that he alone would understand.

But a fortnight passed without eliciting any response, each day the same announcement appearing, and we were about to give it up in despair, our time for remaining at the White House having nearly expired.

From sympathy with, my feelings had turned to anger against him, for the despicable part I considered Antonio had played, towards my darling, and I began even to feel irritable with her for continuing to harbour any affection for this man, the while I hurried our departure forward.

"I shall be glad to leave England," I said, when Ella and Mabel came for the last time to bid us good-bye, a sentiment which gave no little offence, they not only denouncing me as the least affectionate sister they ever heard of, but declared, between themselves, they believed me not quite right, touching their foreheads the while in a significant way.

I only smiled, when, looking in the glass unknown to them, I had witnessed these dumb motions, and then I bid them an affectionate adieu.

The next morning Birdie and I were awake early. We had neither of us slept much, our minds too full of the change which was about to take place in our lives.

We both regretted having to bid farewell to the old White House and its surroundings, endeared to us as they were by our childhood's associations; and to the last moment on that evening preceding our departure we together watched, as we had so often done before, for the last golden rays of the setting sun, as he sank to rest in the west, a strange and stillness pervading all around, each leaf silent, apparently not caring to whisper to each other, as was their wont, in the soft eventide.

We had placed the disposal of our furniture in the hands of an agent, who had sold it to the incoming tenant, who was to take possession the day after our departure.

"Look each door, Jane, and let Mrs. Humphreys have charge of the keys," I was saying, whilst making the last arrangement for our journey.

"Yes, miss," the girl, answered, between her sobs, for she had lived with us as housemaid ever since she left her mother's roof, and was now breaking her heart to think she had to seek other service, when a loud knock at the hall-door caused us both to start.

"Who ever it is, show them into the drawing-room," I said; and a few minutes after she returned, with a strange look on her face, to tell me it was a gentleman who wanted to see me, but he would not send in his card.

"Attend to Miss Birdie," I said, moving towards the door, my heart fluttering the while, as a hope I did not express to my darling took possession of my mind.

I turned one moment, and I knew the same hope was hers, for the colour had suddenly risen to her temples, and she had of late

grown so pale, a light of joyous expectation leaping unconsciously to her beautiful eyes.

The visitor was standing looking out on the grass plot, with the space brown and bare beneath the large chestnut tree where the swing had once hung, mostly covered now with dead leaves, red and yellow, chasing each other before the autumnal wind.

He was doubtless deep in thought, for the handle of the door turning he started visibly, and then he came forward to meet me. It was Signor Palezzi! At first I restrained from holding out my hand to him, but a something in the expression of his face caused me to falter in my determination. He looked so pain-stricken, so utterly miserable, that I could not but pity him, feeling, as I recalled to my mind my visitor of a few weeks back, that the knowledge that she was his wife was sufficient punishment for any man.

"Heaven bless you for this, Miss Macfarlane!" he said, in his broken English, grasping my hand the while; and when he released it I found it wet with his tears.

"Signor Palezzi," I answered, "you have done us the greatest wrong it was possible to do; but, before entirely condemning you, I considered it but just to offer you the opportunity of explaining your conduct, as I could not believe you to be so utterly base as your actions signify."

I paused then, the while I could see a ray of hope had entered into his breast.

"May I speak, then?" he asked, bowing low in his accustomed manner; and I was about to give my consent when a slight sound without caused me to rise, and I opened the door to find Birdie there.

"Don't be cross, Gertie," she said, in a whisper, "but I thought—I was sure—it was his voice, and I could not help listening."

I made no reply, only leading her within, at the same time that she would then have held back, but it was too late, he had seen her, and in another moment she was hanging round his neck.

"Birdie, sit down," I said, in the same breath that I had commanded Antonio to release her. "Surely your pride will not permit you to throw yourself into Signor Palezzi's arms until he can exonerate himself from his most unpardonable conduct?"

I spoke so sternly that she regarded me in amazement; and then, without a word, moved towards the chair I indicated, he the while standing where she left him, like a hidden child."

CHAPTER VI.

A few moments elapsed, he still remaining with his eyes riveted on the carpet, as though intently studying the pattern portrayed thereon, Birdie the while having brought her chair close to mine, until her fair head was resting on my shoulder.

"I would rather you would be seated, Signor," I said; "and as we have purposed leaving Wingford by the 4 p.m. train, you must excuse my asking you to hasten whatever communication you have to make."

He bowed in response, although I could see he seemed startled when I mentioned our intended departure; and then, in broken English, rendered more difficult owing to the excitement under which he was labouring, he began:—

"Mine is an unhappy history," he commenced. "I was but a boy, when, for some political crime, my father was banished his native country. He was a noble there, and young as I was I shall never forget the emotion he betrayed when he thought to leave his beautiful land for ever. To him England seemed unbearable with her cold, grey skies and bitter east winds, but the hope which reigns eternal in the human breast never forsok him that he should, when he closed his eyes in death, it would be beneath the blue heavens of his beloved Italy."

"As I grew in years, through me he seemed to divine that this hope would be realized,

and when at nineteen I expressed my wish and intention, could I do so, to study music, for which I had an extraordinary talent, in that country, he said, he would move Heaven and earth but that he would gratify my desire. We were very poor; my father's goods with his estates having been confiscated for his crime, and it was with the talent I possessed that I looked forward to reinstate the fortunes of our fallen house. A few months after I bade adieu to my only parent, and found myself beneath an Italian sky, and I no longer wondered at the lifelong regret with which my father remembered his sunny home."

"In the course of my professional studies I was called upon to perform in the house of a noble Marchesa, and when the guests had departed, and I with my fellow-artists were about to retire, I was requested to appear before the noble hostess."

"My features seemed so familiar to her, she said, that she desired to know my real name, feeling assured that the one I had assumed was merely a *nom-de-guerre*. I admitted that it was so, that my father's name was Palezzi."

"Palezzi!" she replied, a shade passing over her countenance, and then she asked other questions, until she arrived at the fact, from my answers, that she was not mistaken. That I was, indeed, the son of her oldest friend."

"From that time I became almost a daily visitor at the palace of the Marchesa di Barbona, until, instead of the enjoyment which these visits had given me, a terrible fear came over me. I became but too well aware that the Marchesa was falling in love with me—me, but a youth of twenty summers, and she a woman whose years doubled mine."

"At first I deemed I must be mistaken. The caresses she bestowed on me, the signs of affection she gave me, could be but those of a mother for a son, and in that belief I still lounged in her saloons, sang the songs she loved best, and became the recipient of the favours she showered upon me."

"And does not your father still sigh for his Italian home, Antonio?" she asked me one day, when, as usual, I was thus basking in her smiles.

"It is his only prayer," I answered, "that he may at least be buried beneath the blue skies he loves, so well."

"He shall live, not die only in his beautiful Italy," she replied. She spoke so passionately that I almost started from the cushion where I sat at her feet, whilst she toyed with my hair, and then I told her how impossible it would be, for the moment he set foot on his native soil it would be to endure a life-long imprisonment."

"Foolish boy!" she answered, and then she told me how she had influence at Court, and that she would obtain his pardon that he might return a free man."

"I can do it, Antonio," she said, smiling, "but—," and then she suddenly stopped, and although I pressed her to finish her sentence she declined."

"A few weeks after, however, I received a letter from my father. I was to return to England without delay, and when I told the Marchesa that I was going away she parted with me most kindly, 'hoping,' she said, 'that we should soon meet again.'"

"I was dumfounded, notwithstanding, to hear on my arrival in London, that in that short interval which had taken place since I was in the palace of the Marchesa, that the promise she then made had been fulfilled. My father was a free man, his lands and his title restored; but oh! Heaven, at what a price!"

Signor Palezzi ceased speaking now, his mind evidently returning to the bitter memories of the past; and then, as his eyes fell on Birdie nestling close to my side, I could see the tears gather beneath his long lashes, the while he raised his hand to hide them from her.

"I was to take the Marchesa as my bride," he continued. "At first I laughed right out, thinking that it must be but a joke on my

father's part; but alas! I learnt that it was too true. At the cost of my own liberty, at the sacrifice of the most holy of human passions, it was that he was to be restored to home and riches."

"That woman my wife! I stormed. 'Never father! Rather would I die a beggar, and bury you in a pauper's grave beneath English soil.'

"But in time he so worked on my feelings that under the impression I could not be more wretched than I was then I consented to his wishes; the only gratification I experienced was the gratitude and pleasure which beamed from his aged eyes when I told him of my determination to carry out my part of the programme according to his desire."

"A month after, and we saw the white cliffs of Albion fade from our view. We were going home—home to him, to me—to worse than death."

"It was a grand wedding, as became that of the only son of the noble Signor de Palezzi, and the Marchesa di Barbona; and here Antonio laughed, a cruel hard laugh, which grated on the ears of his hearers."

"At first I was moody," he continued, "and in no way hid how the chains were eating into my soul, and destroying all that was good in my nature. Then I determined on another course. I launched into every vice which presented itself to me, in one night alone losing almost a fortune at the gaming-table, until I was, through my debauchery, becoming the very wreck of my former self."

"It was then my father died, and my conscience told me that I had by my conduct hastened his end. May be it was not so, but I was not so far lost but that the small still voice aroused me to a sense of the degradation to which this downward course was leading me; and over the tomb of my dead parent I made a vow to lead a better life, and I believe, under the influence of a good woman, I should have kept that vow; but my wife made my life a perpetual torment. Her reproaches, her jealousy drove me to distraction, and in a moment of anger, after a scene between us, which was now of daily occurrence, I took an oath never to enter beneath the roof which covered her again. I kept my word. The next day I sailed for England. I realized but a few hundreds of the wealth which was hers and mine, and then I determined by my profession to make, if not a name, at least a livelihood."

"And yet knowing you were a married man Signor, you not only engaged the affections of my sister, but you went through the form of marriage with her?" I said.

"Oh! Gertie, spare him," Birdie cried, clinging to me, for I could not control my indignation at what I considered was his disgraceful conduct."

But he did not speak for a few moments and then, with a sound resembling a moan like one in pain, he turned to her.

"Heaven bless you, my darling!" he said, "and as my heart is now breaking for you, my Birdie, my sweet love, Heaven bear me witness, when I led you to the altar I thought I was a free man."

He then drew a paper from his breast-pocket. It was an Italian journal, dated six months since, in which was announced the death of the Marchesa di Palezzi, after reading which, he told us how she had followed him to London, there employing agents to discover his every movement, and owing to some communication brought to her, how she had caused the announcement of her own demise to appear in the journal which was forwarded to him by an unknown friend. It was the revenge which she had told him was most sweet to her, which she had wreaked on him the while she knew, by so doing, her rival would not go unscathed, as not until she had allowed him in blissful ignorance to make her as he thought his wife would she disclose the fact that she still lived."

"My darling! my darling! say that you

"forgive me!" he pleaded, throwing himself on his knees at the feet of Birdie, who had buried her head on his shoulder. "I will go away, dearest, far, far away, until that day arrives when I can call you, as you are in Heaven's sight, my own true bride. We are both young, and until we can again meet as man and wife I will remain true to the memory of your love. Look up, Birdie, and in your strength give me strength to bear this trouble," he went on, the while I could see the sweat like drops of water fall from his forehead.

"Let it be so, Signor," I interfered. "Birdie will, with me, leave England for awhile, and relying on your word as a gentleman, that you will in no way influence her movements, until, as a free man, you can claim her as your wife, we will keep you acquainted with our intentions and different address."

He arose then, drawing Birdie towards him in one passionate embrace; and then he imprinted hot, burning kisses on her lips and brow, after which he held her for one moment aloof, feasting his eyes on her beauty, and then, with a strong effort, he tore himself from her.

"Good-bye, Miss Macfarlane," he said, holding out his hand to me, hot and burning as it was, whilst the veins on his forehead seemed swollen to bursting with the suffering he was undergoing.

He was gone then, the door closing between him and all he held most dear; and when the sound of his last footsteps had died away I turned to where Birdie still stood.

But there were no tears now in her beautiful eyes, only a dull, dead look of despair over-spreading her whole features, and when I spoke merely a sound like a dry sob escaped her lips.

"Don't look like that, Birdie!" I said; but she only smiled a sad, weary smile; and then with one more fond look at the garden we were leaving for ever, where the dead leaves were now chasing each other over grass and gravel, and the wind was moaning amid the bare branches, I led her from a room which was no longer ours.

CHAPTER VII.

WE were a short time after on our way to London, where we intended to remain that night, and proceed to Dover the day following, from whence we were to cross to Calais.

I had hoped in the bustle and excitement of travelling that my darling would in part forget the scene through which she had just passed; but notwithstanding that not a sob, a sigh even, betrayed the emotion she was inwardly undergoing, I but too well knew the agony of mind she was enduring.

The dull, dead pain which showed itself from those eyes which could not deceive went to my heart, and I prayed almost that she might be able to find relief in the tears which would not come.

To all my inquiries if she felt ill she was quite well she would reply, and even at times would make an effort to smile on my drawing her attention to any object by which I hoped to attract her from her all-absorbing sorrow; but it was an unnatural, hollow laugh, so unlike the ripple of music which would emanate from her coral lips that it pained me to hear.

She would gaze in astonishment at the swarm of human life in the busy streets through which we passed, each back bearing its burden of sorrow, as each went on in the motley throng.

"An accident, ma'am," the driver of the cab in which we were informed me, referring to a crowd of people almost blocking the thoroughfare, respecting the cause of which I had inquired, having arrived at our destination.

An elderly lady had been run over, someone told him, and they didn't know but what she was killed.

"Well, we will get down here, cabby," I

said, for it was only two doors further on, the hotel where we intended to alight.

"Here you are, governor," a boy said to one of the policemen, who had now arrived on the scene, and had given directions to fetch a cab, when he saw ours was now empty, a box or two alone remaining to be removed from the top; and as the last one was carried into the hotel I could see them bearing what appeared to be the lifeless form of a woman to the empty vehicle.

Curiosity, maybe a power stronger, caused me to advance to the spot.

"Allow me," I said, and without assigning any reason I moved through the space which was voluntarily cleared for me, merely telling the policeman, who turned rather angrily on me, I thought I had left my bag on the seat of the empty vehicle, and then I saw that which made my blood leap through my veins.

The next moment I told the men not to convey the injured lady to the hospital, but to carry her within the hotel, where I would be responsible for everything, provided a doctor was sent for without delay.

They hesitated for one moment, but on my returning with the landlord, who said it was all right, they followed my directions. And so they carried her within, laying her gently on the bed of the room where they placed her, a few minutes only elapsing before a doctor was in attendance.

Birdie had been shown to our apartments, where she was nervously awaiting me, wondering the while why I should take such interest in the matter, and when I entered I found her impatiently pacing up and down the room.

"Oh, Gertie, I thought you were lost!" she said. "Whatever made you so long?"

I came near to where she was standing.

"Birdie," I said, "God's ways are very wonderful, dear! Surely he has led us here for some purpose we cannot now discern. This accident, my child, cannot you think why it was I insisted on her being brought here?"

But she failed to understand my meaning, looking only frightened, as though she feared some fresh trouble was in store for her.

"Birdie, don't look like that, my darling!" I said, drawing her towards me. "It was a woman, dear, who was knocked down, and that woman was *his* wife!"

At first she could scarcely realise what I told her; and then, as the truth dawned upon her, a tumult of feelings surged through her brain. And could she be blamed if in that one moment a hope, a prayer even to Heaven passed her lips, that she might be removed from between her and her life's happiness?

I had informed the landlord of the name and rank of the unconscious burden, which they had, at my request, brought into the house; but when they told me a short while after that the doctor had pronounced life to be extinct, a cold shudder passed through my frame.

Birdie had retired at my request. She looked so worn and weary, and the death of the Marchesa was at yet unknown to her, but it was then that I telegraphed to Antonio. "Come at once," I wired. "Clifford's Hotel, Strand. G. Macfarlane," and then I sat down to await his arrival. I had once ventured to the room where the dead lay, but I soon replaced the sheet which covered the features, looking younger and less drawn in death than when I last viewed them in life, and as I moved from the spot I thanked Heaven for its goodness.

But it was in the early hours of a new day that Antonio arrived. His face was pinched and worn, and he trembled visibly when he was shown to my room.

"Birdie?" He questioned. "Oh! Gertie, don't keep me in suspense. The worst is easier to bear than this dreadful doubt."

Of her—only of *her*, I thought, and his wife lying cold and dead beneath the same roof!

"No—no, Antonio. Birdie is not ill, only tired, poor child, and like a weary babe sleep-

ing peacefully; but your wife, the Marchesa, is here."

"Here!" he exclaimed, and I could see the veins rise on his forehead like cords under the influence of his passion.

I placed my hand on his arm then.

"Be calm, Antonio," I said. "She will never come between you and your happiness again. She is dead!"

"Dead!" he ejaculated. "Dead!" and then he sank down on a chair by the table where he was standing, burying his face in his hands, while the tears he could not restrain welled through his fingers.

But I knew it was not the outpouring of his grief which thus shook his frame. No, it was not for the lifeless woman that he thus wept, but for the gentle girl, over whose future a dark, deep shadow had fallen through him.

I led him then to the chamber of death—all so still—and he looked for one moment on the dead face, and then he turned, whilst something like a shudder passed through his frame.

We closed the door gently behind us then, and, in his answer to his mute appeal, I bid him follow me to where our darling was sleeping in an adjoining apartment, her fair head with its wealth of golden tresses resting on a snow-white pillow, her long, curled lashes still wet with the tears she had shed ere sleep had closed her eyes.

How long he stood there gazing on the lovely face! And then he stooped to impress a kiss on her forehead, but she merely turned like a restless child, the while her rose-bud lips unclosed, and in her sleep she muttered "Antonio," and then I bade him leave her to her rest.

I was fatigued too. It had been an eventful day for all, and I was glad to seek the repose I so much needed; but my rest was fitful and disturbed, and I was almost glad when I again awoke to the busy sounds of a London day.

Antonio left in the afternoon, nor did he come again until four days after, when the remains of the Marchesa had been placed in their last narrow bed.

"Spare no expense, Gertie!" he had said to me. "I will pay all, but do not ask me to be present at the funeral. I could not bear that; it would be such a mockery;" and so we, Birdie and I, made all necessary arrangements, beautiful flowers from Covent Garden covering the coffin with its oaken lid, on which was engraved,—

"Bella Marchesa di Pallezza, died September 30, 1887, aged 52," and then the cold earth fell over all.

CONCLUSION.

THERE is little more to tell, for long years have past now since that autumn day on which Birdie and I were sole mourners over the dead woman's grave. I believe something crept out, notwithstanding the pains we took that all should be kept quiet, for quite a crowd had assembled round the door when they brought the coffin out, and no one spoke of the dead as a less personage than a princess; but whatever her faults might have been they are forgotten now, and even Antonio does not fail to see that the stranger's grave in the English burial-ground, over which beautiful flowers bloom in their season, is still tended with care.

Birdie was married a short time after, Ella and Mabel, in total ignorance of former events, even forgiving her the sin she committed of coming into the world when she was not required, when they ascertained the fact that she had allied herself to a noble Italian family, in their condescension consenting to be amongst the wedding guests.

I suppose I shall remain with them still until the leveller of all closes my eyes, for neither Antonio or his wife will hear of my leaving; and the little ones, for there are three now, roar out their disapproval if ever I threaten to go away from them all, who still regard me in the light of Little Mother!

[THE END]

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

(Continued from p. 536.)

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CHAPTER IX.—(continued.)

Gladys, although not overburdened with principle, had a great respect for social conventionalities and public opinion. She would not be willing to act in defiance of either, especially since her own position as Lord Roscoe's wife and a leader of society was far too safe and exalted for her to do anything calculated to imperil it.

No, he must steer clear of Gladys in planning his desperate moves and putting it into execution, he decided. If he revealed it to her she might feel constrained to betray him, rather than tacitly consent to such a breach of law and conventionality as that which he contemplated.

He smoked hard, after reaching his rooms, and drank a great deal of brandy; then he adjourned to bed, rising late, and going out to make some necessary arrangements.

Joshua Vernon was undisguisedly angry when he became aware that Madeline had refused to marry his favourite, Horace Fielding. That young man had humoured and flattered him so adroitly as to win a very high place in his regard. Uncle Joshua could not understand or sympathise with his niece's prejudice against Fielding. He thought it unkind, unjust. He tried persuasion, argument, entreaty, in the endeavour to change her opinion, to induce her to accept Horace Fielding as her fiancé. When they failed to produce any impression upon her, he grew angry and vehement.

"Marry Fielding, and you shall have fifty thousand pounds for your wedding portion!" he said, sharply; "refuse, and I will leave you the proverbial shilling. Should I ask you to accept him if he were unworthy of you, pray? Your refusal is a direct reflection upon my judgment and discrimination in the choice of a husband for you. You have disappointed me, Madeline, more than a little."

"Ask me to do anything but this, dear Uncle Joshua, and I will gladly obey you," Madeline responded, with quivering lips. "I would rather die than marry Horace Fielding. You have been kind to me, far kinder than I deserve, and it grieves me to be compelled to act contrary to your will, yet I have no alternative. I am willing to go away, to leave you if you are tired of having me here. Mrs. Falconer has not engaged a companion yet. I can return to her."

Uncle Joshua drew in his horns at this. It would have given him real pain to forfeit his niece's society, to destroy the good understanding that existed between them on all points save one. With a growl he bade her never to allude to the subject again, while resuming his ordinary attitude towards her. Horace Fielding stayed away, and Madeline began to feel almost happy since the persecution had ceased.

She was sitting by herself in the drawing-room one evening, her uncle being absent at a City dinner. The weather was wild and boisterous, the wind high, hail dashing every now and then against the window panes. Absorbed in a new novel, cooily seated in an easy-chair, Madeline hardly looked up as the footman entered the room bearing a note upon a silver salver, addressed to her.

As she opened it a little cry broke from her lips. The tremulous, uneven hand-writing was that of Gervase Talbot, her missing lover!

"Come at once to the above address if you would see me again in life," ran the note. "I am very ill, not expected to recover. I will explain all when we meet, Madeline. By our mutual love I implore you to come, alone and unattended, without any delay to your unhappy lover, Gervase Talbot."

"Who brought this note?" she demanded, springing to her feet.

"A boy, miss," said the footman; "he went off at once, without waiting for an answer."

"Get me a cab, please! I am going out," she continued, rapidly. "I dare say I shall return before Mr. Vernon; but I will leave a note for him on the mantelpiece."

Considerably astonished and extremely curious, Charles went to hail a "growler" for his young mistress. Meanwhile, Madeline changed her dress, wrapped herself in a fur-lined cloak, a little fur cap compactly crowning her dark, glossy braids, and indited a brief note, in which she informed her uncle of the nature of the errand that was taking her from home. She sealed this note, as a precaution against the prying propensities of the average domestic.

Ere twenty minutes had elapsed she was in the cab on her way towards Gervase Talbot, in prompt response to that unexpected summons, her mind in a state of chaos—joy, bewilderment, sorrow, relief, all struggling for the mastery. If she had a paramount thought it took the shape of thankfulness that he still lived.

"My love, my darling! what motive can have prompted you to hide yourself from me all this while?" she murmured; "what mystery is about to be revealed? Oh, it cannot be that you are dying! Heaven would not snatch you from me in the first moment of our reunion! My prayers, my ceaseless care and attention, will be permitted to restore you to life and health, and then the bitter past will be forgotten."

The address mentioned in the note purporting to come from Gervase Talbot was in a part of London quite unknown to Madeline—an obscure terrace in Camden-town. The cabman seemed conversant with it, however, and drove quickly along.

In spite of her preoccupied, excited frame of mind Madeline noticed that they were leaving all the large, well-lighted populous thoroughfares behind, and entering a dark and comparatively silent region, consisting principally of third-rate private houses. Gervase must be in poor circumstances, she repeated; that was why he had requested her to come alone. No suspicion of impropriety in thus granting his petition crossed her pure young mind.

Gervase was ill, and in need of her; it only remained to go to him at once, love and duty both pointing in the same direction. True modesty is devoid of all affectation or prudish scruples. Hence the frank fearlessness, the unhesitating devotion to the man she loved displayed by Madeline on receiving his note, imploring her to visit him.

"Number nineteen, Caroline-terrace, miss," said the cabman, jumping down from off his box as the cab stopped, and opening the door. "Shall I ring?"

"If you please," replied Madeline, getting out, and glancing curiously around her. It was too dark to see much, yet Caroline-terrace appeared to belong to the shabby-genteel style of town dwellings. Its three-story houses had a dingy, battered aspect, and the high, blank wall opposite gave an impression of dullness and desolation, accentuated by the dark stormy night.

"Is Mr. Talbot staying here?" she inquired of the landlady—a smartly-dressed elderly woman, with a sorrow face and shifty dark eyes, who appeared in response to the cabman's ring.

"Quite right, miss; the gentleman is in the second-floor back," said the woman, promptly. "Will you come in?"

Madeline paid the cabman, and followed the landlady—who had bolted and locked the front door after him—upstairs with a palpitating heart. Would Gervase be much changed? Would—

"This is the room, miss," said the landlady, ushering Madeline into a tolerably well-furnished sitting-room at the back of the house on the second-floor—a room communicating with another, the door of which was closed.

A gentleman, who had been seated with his back to her, rose suddenly from the easy-chair as the landlady disappeared, and Madeline uttered an involuntary cry of anger and affright upon finding herself face to face with Horace Fielding!

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded, steadying herself by grasping the back of a chair. "Where is Mr. Talbot? I came here to see him."

"And to find me waiting here in his stead is, of course, a bitter disappointment to Miss Vernon," said Horace Fielding, in a tone of easy courtesy, an evil smile lurking in his light blue eyes. "I am sorry that I cannot inform you as to Mr. Talbot's present whereabouts, since I am quite unacquainted with them."

"And that note?"

"I must confess to having written it. I knew it would bring you."

"Mr. Fielding, I knew you to be an unprincipled, worthless man. I did not deem you capable, though, of such villany as that you have dared to commit!"

The terrible nature of her position was beginning to dawn upon her, yet she was more angry than frightened. The scorn in her eyes and her voice made Horace Fielding writhe mentally beneath it.

"I strove to win you by fair means in the first instance," he said, fiercely, savagely, his worst passions aroused, his mean nature up in arms. "It is your fault if, through your unyielding attitude towards me, I have been driven to adopt foul ones rather than lose you. At least my note has fulfilled its purpose."

"What was your motive, pray, in thus imitating another man's handwriting? What object do you hope to gain by my presence here to-night?"

"I shall gain you," he said, slowly and emphatically. "I am not a man to be trifled with, Madeline, when I—I have—set my heart upon any particular consummation. You will remain here in these rooms, which I have secured for you until such time as you consent to become my wife. Escape from them will be impossible; yet the doors will stand open to you on the day you consent to marry me!"

"Are you mad?" she demanded, pale but resolute. "You dare not detain me here against my will. This is London, and the nineteenth century, while such an act as that contemplated by you would bring you within reach of the law. Abduction cases belong to a bygone age. I shall appeal to the landlady to release me."

"She is a friend of mine," said Horace Fielding, standing between Madeline and the door. "She is acting under my instructions. An appeal to her would be worse than useless. It can hardly be called an abduction case, seeing that you came here, alone, of your own accord to meet me. Your hurried departure from home will give rise to many conjectures, which your prolonged absence will serve to strengthen. A marriage between us can alone prevent you from being seriously compromised—now!"

The hatred and loathing, the speechless scorn in her eyes, grew deeper as she listened to him.

"Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed, "your plans are foiled! I left a note addressed to my uncle, informing him where I had gone, and on what errand. A few hours hence he will be here inquiring for me, should I fail to return. Now, will you open that door and let me go?"

"And you think I was not prepared for such a contingency?" he said, doggedly.

"Should Mr. Vernon come here in search of you, he will be informed that you quitted the house nearly an hour after entering it with the gentleman you came to see. Your only hope of escape lies in becoming my wife. Otherwise, there is every chance of your remaining her for months—perhaps, years! I am not easily discouraged, Madeline. I will leave you now if you desire it, to return again tomorrow. The landlady will attend to your requirements."

A sense of being trapped, caged, hopelessly at this man's mercy, began to oppress the girl, brave as she was.

"Do you not fear society's verdict when once your infamous conduct in using Gervase Talbot's name to decoy me from home becomes known, as it must do sooner or later?" she asked, pushing the dark wavy hair back from her forehead with feverish trembling hands. "You—a gentleman!"

"My *ruse* cannot transpire until after we are married," he said passionately. "I shall not even be suspected. The blame of having carried you off will rest upon Gervase Talbot until then; and then—well, you will hardly gain anything by villifying your husband."

Madeline rushed to the window. It only commanded a view of a dreary walled-in back garden.

She was in every sense of the word a prisoner, and the knowledge rendered her slightly hysterical.

"Let me go," she cried wildly. "Horace Fielding, what have I done that you should plan this fiendish design to wreck my happiness and my reputation? I tell you even now that I would sooner die a thousand deaths than become your wife!"

With a sudden change of mood he flung himself upon his knees before her.

"Madeline," he exclaimed, hoarsely, striving to clasp her hands in his; "forgive me, pity me! If I loved you less I should not have played this desperate card. Oh! my darling, try to love me, only a little in return, and my whole life shall be devoted to rendering yours happy. Only give yourself to me, and I can, I will, atone for the wrong I have committed."

Her only answer was a wild cry for help, repeated again and again.

You may know what is going on in your own house, but, in London especially, you cannot tell what your next-door neighbour is up to.

A door of communication had once been made between nineteen Caroline terrace, and the next house to it, when the same family occupied both dwellings.

To suit subsequent tenants this door had been locked, the landlord holding the key. The little grating over it and the door itself, which opened into the sitting-room where Madeline stood, had been papered over and entirely concealed on that side, forming apparently part of the wall.

On the other side of it was a bed-sitting-room, which the landlady of number twenty had recently let to a gentleman lodger.

Madeline's cries reached him plainly through the grating. Throwing aside his book he made for the locked door.

A few vigorous kicks burst it open, tearing through the wall paper on the other side.

Madeline, to her profound astonishment, beheld a man coming through the wall to her aid.

"What is amiss?" asked the new-comer, glancing inquiringly at her; then in a changed hoarse voice, "Is it possible? Good heavens! Madeline!"

"Gervase! Oh, save me; take me from this dreadful house!" she cried, as she fell fainting into his arms.

(To be continued.)

EDUCATION, in its true sense, must have two distinct aims—to inform and develop the mind, and to inspire and influence the heart. The success of each of these depends largely upon the success of the other; and upon their united and harmonious action will depend the strength and excellence of the character and the purity and value of the life. All knowledge is like good seed—it cannot be too highly prized or too widely disseminated; but to realize its possibilities it must be placed in fruitful soil prepared to receive and to vitalize it.

FACETIÆ.

THE path of duty. Through the onstom-house.

BOARDER: "Waiter, there's a hair in this stew." Waiter (cheerfully): "Yes, sir; it's a rabbit stew."

NATURE is full of wise provisions. Wives do their worst cooking when they are young and irresistible.

TEACHER: "Why were you not at school yesterday?" Boy: "I sprained my foot, sir." Teacher: "That's a lame excuse."

JUDGE: "Did your mother-in-law ever resort to personal violence?" Witness: "If personal violence is flinging me out of a window, well, yes."

"I CHARGED a battery myself once," exclaimed an ex-antler. "You did," replied an old artilleryman who knew him. "You charged our battery a-shilling a drink for bad whiskey!"

A SUBSCRIBER wants to know how to make a hot house. Some men have done it simply by forgetting to brush off a little wisp of golden-blond hair from the coat-sleeve on the side nearest the heart.

Said a very old lady, in a penitential mood induced by illness, "I've been a great sinner for more than eighty years, and didn't know it." "Goodness!" exclaimed her maid, who had lived with her for years; "I knewed it all the time!"

WIFE: "The question, 'How to get rid of the surplus?' is an important one in political economy, is it not, John?" Husband: "Yes, my dear; but the question in private economy, 'How to obtain a surplus to get rid of,' is of the greater importance."

"AND so you think you will get married when you grow up to be a young lady, Flossie?" said the caller. "O I haven't a doubt of it," assented Flossie. "Everybody says I am very much like my mamma, and she, you know, has been married three times."

THE barber's pole used to represent an arm with blood streaming down, as barbers of the olden time were also surgeons. There is a question as to the origin of the blue stripes, but it is supposed to have been taken from the patient's countenance when the doctor's bill came in.

AN EXPERIENCED WIDOW.—Friend (to widow mourning her third husband): "I sympathise deeply with you, my dear Mrs. Hendricks, and was sorry not to be with you in your hour of affliction." Widow (sadly): "Ah, my friend, you don't know what it is to lose husbands."

FATHER (trying to read the paper): "What was that awful racket in the hall just now?" Mother: "One of the children fell downstairs." Father (irascibly): "Well, you tell those children that if they cannot fall downstairs quietly they won't be allowed to fall down them at all."

ANGRY GUEST (in German restaurant): "Have you got the cheek to charge a shilling for a chunk of meat tough enough to break my jaw? I've got a mind to lick you." Proprietor: "Petter not dry dot, young veller. Choost you veel dot muscle in dot arm! Efery day I eats dot meat."

"THERE goes one of the proudest young society ladies about here," said McPetter to Wigwag, as they stripped cautiously down the icy pavement. "Which one?" "The lady just ahead of us." "Goodness! We'd better look out, then!" "Why?" curiously. "Because 'pride goeth before a fall.'"

THE quarrel between the newly-wedded couple was working up into a regular row, when he said, "When you begin to talk nonsense I hold my tongue!" But it was too bad of her to say, "If I were guided by the same rule, with regard to you, I should never speak at all!" Then the battle began again.

"HARRY, you should not ask Cousin John how much money he is worth; that is not polite." "I wasn't trying to be polite. I just wanted to know."

MR. GINN wants his name changed. If he would go to Italy and become an opera singer, he would find his name changed to Jinnin-wiski before he returned home.

MORNING MYSTERIES.—Wife: "Do you know what time it was when you got in last night?" Husband: "Nearly one o'clock. It was after midnight when I got through balancing my books. Well, well! This is curious. Here's my hat under the bed. I must have hung it on this chair and it fell down." "Probably." "Where are my boots?" "On the hat rack."

YOUNG MISS: "I have set no date for my wedding. I want to wait until we are able to begin housekeeping." Experienced Matron: "Oh you foolish child. Don't do anything of the kind. Go to boarding." "But boarding-house life is so full of trials." "So is house-keeping, my dear. Go to boarding, by all means. Then when things go wrong your husband will have to take it out of the land-lady."

WHY TALKING IS NOT A SENSE.—"Mamma," said a five-year-old the other day, "ain't there any other senses 'cept seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling?" "No, my child," answered the mother; "it is usually considered that these five are enough!" "Well," said the little one, with an air of deep conviction, "I s'pose talking would be called a sense if there wasn't so much nonsense about it."

THE ADVANTAGES OF TRAVEL.—"I should infer, sir," he said to a young man, "from the air of hauteur and easy self-possession which seem to be your distinguishing characteristics, that you have mixed much with the world, and have travelled extensively?" "Yes, sir," replied the young man, graciously unbending, "I have been an extensive traveller in my time. For the past eight years I've been an engine-driver on the underground railway."

A MIXED TOAST.—At a recent dinner given by the chief magistrate of London, three foreign consuls were present whom the Lord Mayor wished to honour by drinking their healths. He accordingly, it is alleged, but we do not vouch for its strict accuracy, directed the toastmaster to announce the healths of "the three present consuls." He, however, mistaking the words, gave out the following: "The Lord Mayor drinks the health of the three per cent. consuls."

WORKING ON A CHILD'S FEELINGS.—"My darling," said a fond mother, who believed in appealing to children's tender feelings instead of punishing them, "if you are so naughty you will grieve mamma so that she will get ill and have to lie in a bed in a dark room and take nasty medicine; and then she may die and have to be taken away out to the cemetery and be buried; and you will —" The child had become more solemn, but an angelic smile overspread his face at his mother's last words, and throwing his arms about her neck, he exclaimed, "Oh, mamma! and mayn't I sit beside the coachman?"

EXPLANATIONS NEEDED.—A well-known young man called on a lady friend a few evenings since, her mother being present. After a while she was called from the room a few minutes. She excused herself for retiring. He readily excused her. What young man wouldn't, and hope the minute might be lengthened into hours. She left one sitting on the sofa, the other in the arm-chair. When she returned they were in the same position, but strange to relate he had a bunch of hair hanging to his coat button, and she had a necktie attached to her breast pin. Explanations were called for, and that young man wished that he had "wings like a dove that he might fly away." It is funny how inquisitive some folks will be.

SOCIETY.

THE QUEEN, according to present arrangements, is to arrive at the Villa Palmieri on the 23rd inst. Her Majesty will travel incognito, as the Countess of Balmoral.

THE second Drawing Room was postponed as well as some of the Court Festivities in celebration of the Prince and Princess's Silver Wedding, on account of the death of the Emperor of Germany, which took place on March 9th.

THE rumoured engagement of Prince George of Wales to his cousin, the Princess Alexandra of Greece, and that of the Princess Victoria of Wales to the young Duke of Sparta would cause general satisfaction. The Throne of Greece is not a steady or glorious one; but the Duke of Sparta will be a rich man. The young Princess Victoria of Wales has a slight tendency to deafness, that distressing infirmity to which the Princess of Wales is such a victim.

THE Duke and Duchess of Connaught were present, the other day, at an Indian wedding. A company of Nautch girls danced and sang, and the ceremony was conducted by Brahmin priests in the true orthodox fashion under a *mandap*, specially erected for the purpose. The bride and bridegroom were introduced to the Duke and Duchess, and were presented with rich garlands and bouquets of flowers, and with what pleased them still more—fresh coconuts enveloped in gold and silver leaves, as a symbol of good luck and peace and plenty.

THE "Ice Palace" at St. Petersburg is now as complete as can be—furniture, bed, chimney-piece, and every detail are cut out of blocks of ice; and there is an ice chimney with a sham fire in the hearth, ice balustrades running round the house, and two huge statues carved in ice, on either side of the hall-door. It has cost about four thousand roubles, a pretty sum to spend on a winter toy that will break up and melt at the latest in April! It adjoins the St. Petersburg Aquarium, and has been built on the model of the famous ice house of 1740.

IT appears that the Marechal Niel rose is the Empress of Russia's favourite flower. Knowing this, the Prince Emanuel Narischkin, on the occasion of the ball he gave a few weeks ago, in honour of the Czar and Czarina, sent to Nice for a bouquet composed of one hundred of these roses, and presented it to Her Imperial Majesty on her arrival. She and the Czar remained for some time, entering into conversation with Prince Emanuel and his guests, and admiring the extremely beautiful floral decorations, which profusely adorned the ball-room and supper tables, and which had also come from Nice by special messenger, though they looked so fresh as to render it difficult to believe they had made so long a journey in the depth of winter.

MILIE, ZUCCHI received a curious wedding present, the other day, from some of her husband's friends. It will be remembered that she was the principal ballet-dancer at the Eden Theatre in Paris, and has just been married to a rich Russian Prince Basetchikoff. The wedding souvenir consisted of one hundred and twenty silver drinking cups, all made in the shape of dancing slippers of different forms and various sizes.

SOCIETY on the other side of the Atlantic now love darkness rather than light at the dinner-table. Gas, electricity, and oil lamps are no longer permitted to illuminate the fish, to cast a lurid glow on the soup, or to show up the outlines in their enticing brown crust. Each guest must now be content with the feeble flicker of a single wax candle placed in front of his plate. Shades of various tints and ornamental shapes supply decorative effects of subdued light.

STATISTICS.

NEW YORK CITY educates about three hundred thousand children annually, in one hundred and thirty-four school buildings, covering an area of thirty-five acres. These buildings placed side by side would extend more than two miles. There are about four thousand teachers, and the annual expense of these schools is about 2800,000.

CITIES OF HALF-A-MILLION AND OVER.—London, 3,955,810; Paris, France, 2,269,023; Canton, China, 1,500,000; New York (U.S.), 1,400,000; Aitohi, Japan, 1,332,050; Berlin, Prussia, 1,122,330; Changchoofoo, China, 1,000,000; Sian, China, 1,000,000; Tschautchauts, China, 1,000,000; Tokio, Japan, 987,887; Sattama, Japan, 962,717; Tien-tsin, China, 950,000; Philadelphia (U.S.), 850,000; Hangtoehon, China, 800,000; Pekin, China, 800,000; Tschingtu-fu, China, 800,000; Woo-chang, China, 800,000; Brooklyn (U.S.), 771,000; St. Petersburg, Russia, 766,664; Calcutta, India, 766,298; Vienna, Austria, 720,105; Chicago (U.S.), 715,000; Constantinople, Turkey, 700,000; Foo-choo, China, 630,000; Moscow, Russia, 611,974; Hangchow-foo, China, 600,000; Hankow, China, 600,000; Liverpool, 573,000; Glasgow, 514,043; Peking, Java, 505,204; Madrid, Spain, 500,900; Bangkok, Siam, 500,000; King-te-chiang, China, 500,000; St. Louis (U.S.), 500,000; Tat-seen-loy, China, 500,000.

GEMS.

LESS coin, less care; to know how to dispense wealth is to possess it.

WHO has sounded the depths of human endurance? Yet, flourishing about in its shallows, we often think we have reached the bottom.

THE light which shows what is wrong and what is right, comes from the understanding; this, in many cases, works as rapidly as an instinctive sense.

COARSE kindness is, at least, better than coarse anger; and in all private quarrels, the duller nature is triumphant by reason of its inherent dulness.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

STEWED HADDOCK.—Place the haddock in a pan of salted water and simmer one hour. Lay the fish, minus the head, on a platter; pour over it drawn butter; then spread with mashed potatoes enough to cover it nicely. Over the potatoes spread the whites of four eggs. Put in the oven and bake a light brown.

HOME-MADE BREAD should never have any soda in it; any bread containing it wants to be eaten at once, or it becomes dry and unpleasant. Break the German yeast into warm, not hot water, and stir until dissolved one ounce of yeast in a teacupful of water, make a hole in the flour to be mixed, and stir this lightly in, covering the mixture with a light coating of flour. Cover the pan with something thick, and stand in a warm place to rise. This will be seen when the surface of the flour cracks, and the "sponge," as it is sometimes termed, begins to ooze through. Have ready a jug of warm water, and mix the whole into a firm dough, kneading it well with the hands; cover again, and keep warm until the mass when pulled open with the finger looks really spongy—i.e., full of little holes. It is then ready for the oven, and can be baked in tins or cottage loaves. One ounce of German yeast will raise eight pounds of flour. Great care must be taken in winter to keep the dough from draughts, and in a warm corner, or it will be heavy and uneatable.

MISCELLANEOUS.

A FRANK AUTHOR.—Young ladies who flirt may draw a moral from the ensuing: Hjalmar Njorth Boyesen is as strong physically as he is mentally. He is a constant marvel at the seaside resorts, where he spends his summers, on account of his long distance swimming. He picks up a great deal of material for literary work during the season, and resorts unblushingly to flirtation to get it. At the close of a vacation on the Isles of Shoals he bade goodbye to a young lady, with whom he had carried on a flirtation, with the words: "I am very glad I met you; you have been worth at least five hundred pounds to me."

CARE OF CUT FLOWERS.—Cut flowers may be preserved fresh for a long time in the following manner:—Get a glass shade and place it on a non-porous vessel to form a stand; put water around the bottom to keep the shade airtight, then procure fresh cut blossoms, put them in water immediately, drop into the water in which the flowers are placed a small quantity of spirits of chloroform, and placed the shade over them at once. The flowers thus treated, some writer says, will keep fresh for months, but one would hardly expect they would be in a very fresh condition after their four weeks' confinement, but the new preserving process is worth trying. Care should be taken to have all in readiness. As soon as the chloroform is put in place the shade over them, and water should be always kept around the bottom. A large soup plate would do for this.

AN EXCELLENT SUGGESTION.—How many of us have a family register? The family chronicles have mostly been confined to the mere entry of the births, marriages and deaths of one section of a family, only within the covers of a family Bible. But the idea is to keep not only these events, but every item of interest and importance in the history of the whole family connection. This could be kept by one branch of the family with but little trouble if all, when they found anything interesting, would send it on to the keeper of the book. Such a book, when filled, would be extremely interesting to be handed down as an heirloom from one generation to another. The keeping of such family registers would bring before the minds of the survivors of a family the events of deepest interest in their family history—events that would point out great lessons—and prepare the feet of the traveller still journeying through life to tread more securely; to beware of the rough places trod by his ancestors, and perhaps serve as an incentive to climb still higher. The leaves could be interspersed with family pictures, sketches and souvenirs of the family history.

SCHOOLS OF SWITZERLAND.—German is taught in the schools, and sermons are occasionally preached in that language. The same education is given in all districts; and among the Italian Gräubundlers there are both Protestant and Catholic villages. It is therefore a frequent custom for German families to send one or two of their sons during the winter into an Italian family, receiving an equal number of Italian children in return. Business communications, which are continually going on across the passes of Bernina, Maloja, and Bernardino, facilitate this exchange; and thus, without any additional expense except that of the journey two families may obtain for their lads the advantage of acquiring a foreign language. It should be mentioned that the schools in mountain villages are only open during the long Alpine winter—that is, from the middle of October till the following Easter. This, though it somewhat retards the scholars' advance in learning, is excellent for his health. All through the summer lads and boys tend sheep or cows upon the fields, help their fathers to make hay, roam in the woods, and get their fill of air and sunshine.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

G. D.—No. In selling his patented article, the patentee must conform to the laws of the land.

G. E. R.—It was one of those simple acts of courtesy which an engaged gentleman may properly perform.

FRANKS.—1. Most good map publishers would be able to oblige you. 2. Not during the present year. 3. Any good publisher could obtain it.

LOLA.—1. Pale blue would be very becoming, and any shade of light brown. 2. It is probably constitutional, and a medical man should be consulted.

M. N. T.—The husband would be entitled to the custody of the child, and if he insisted on keeping the boy with him, he could lawfully do so.

ADA.—According to your description of yourself you are not a pronounced type of either the blonde or the brunette, but you come nearer the brunette than the blonde.

LENNIE M.—The persistency of your betrothed in making the false accusation against you after you had denied it was sufficient reason for you to break your engagement with him.

O. B.—In introducing a young lady to a young man whose father is standing near, and is known to the young lady, you could properly say, "Allow me to present to you Mr. Blank, junior."

E. C. V.—You will have to consult persons who are engaged in metal plating in order to get practical information on the subject. June 28th, 1857, came on Sunday, and July 30th, 1873, on Sunday.

AMICE WOODS.—1. The game is of very great antiquity. The Arabs have the credit of the invention. 2. We regret we cannot inform you. 3. Most probably Damascus, but some antiquarians give the palm in age to Balkh.

CHERIE.—An only child is born with the same natural disposition which it would have if it were only one of a dozen children. It is the indulgence with which an only child is treated which makes it develop into a selfish boy or girl.

E. A. A.—Try rubbing weak cologne water into your skin after pressing out the flesh-worms (scabs is their name). Pay attention to your diet; eat nothing very greasy, bathe your face often in soft warm water and rub with your hands.

D. F.—No. Such conduct on the part of the wife is very reprehensible. The husband has a right to insist on the immediate discontinuance of his wife's appropriation of money given her for household expenditure to the aid of her poor relations.

M. H. C.—The Inquisition to which you refer was a court established for the suppression of heresy. In Spain it was recognised as a State tribunal, and punishment was inflicted for what the ecclesiastical judges pronounced apostasy from the Christian faith.

L. C. W.—The Russian-American Fur Company in Alaska was organized in 1799. The charter expired in 1868, and the Government declined to renew it. The company, however, continued its control by permission of the home authorities. The United States took control of the Territory in October 18, 1867.

EMME.—1. Moles have no special significance. 2. So many are published every week that it would be invidious to name one in particular. Any good music-seller could inform you as to the most popular. You write a fair hand, and are probably rather romantic. Both young ladies would be considered handsome.

LADY GERDA.—If it is not clearly understood that the young man is your lover, then he has no claim on you that should prevent your accepting an invitation from another gentleman. Should you accept attentions from others, it would probably lead the young man to hasten his love-making, especially if he really cares for you.

J. C. G.—A billion, according to the French method of numeration, is a thousand millions, or 1,000,000,000; according to the English method, a million of millions, or 1,000,000,000,000. In the United States the French method is used; that is the billion is a thousand millions, and each denomination is a thousand times the preceding.

N. O.—The common language of kings and queens is *we*. This plural style was begun with King John, A.D. 1199. Before this time sovereigns used the singular person in all their edicts. The German emperors and French kings used the plural about A.D. 1200. Public journals also used the plural form, as indicating the plurality of pens employed upon them.

L. L. R.—Use borax only to cleanse your hair, and then not in very strong solution. Soap will injure the colour and texture of the hair if "used constantly to make it smooth." Black or green tea either is used as a wash to darken the hair. The best rule for preserving the hair is to wash it only to keep it clean, to put no pomade or patent dressing upon it, and to keep it well brushed.

MINA.—We do not think that we can say anything to lessen your unhappiness. Your case is one of those sad and unfortunate ones that nothing but time and the channelling of the deepest principles and affections can remedy. It would be better to let your husband alone than to talk to him about the matter which causes you so much unhappiness. Do your own duties as lovingly as you can, and leave the results to Providence.

ERMINIE.—To make hard white tallow soap for domestic purposes, dissolve two pounds of sal soda in one gallon of boiling soft water. Mix into it two pounds of fresh slacked lime, stirring occasionally for a few hours. Then let it settle; pour off the clear liquid and boil two pounds of tallow in it until all the tallow is dissolved. Cool it in a fat box and cut it into bars or cakes. It can be scented by stirring in the desired perfume when cool.

G. H. T.—No. A letter addressed simply London, England, would reach him. Dr. Franklin, in writing to Dr. Johnson, simply addressed his letter, "Dr. Samuel Johnson, England." Johnson was so pleased with the compliment (inasmuch as the address implied that he was so famous that it was not necessary to be particular about specifying his residence), that in replying he addressed his letter: "Benjamin Franklin, the World." The letter reached Franklin, and he was delighted with the address.

R. T.—Some innocent and harmless people have mercuric and clairvoyant powers, and in some cases can exercise a soothing and curative effect upon persons who are afflicted with certain kinds of nervous diseases. There are also evil-minded persons who possess mercuric and clairvoyant powers, and use them for their own selfish purposes, without regard to the injury which they cause to their dupes and victims. Such clairvoyants should be avoided.

E. A. A.—A labour-saving soap is thus made: Take two pounds of sal soda, two pounds of yellow bar soap, and ten quarts of water. Cut the soap in thin slices, and boil together two hours. Strain, and it will be fit for use. Put the clothes in soak the night before you wash, and to every pail of water in which you boil them, add a pound of soap. They will need little or no rubbing. Carefully and thoroughly rinse them out, and they will be found when dry clean and white.

THE MOTHER'S WORLD.

MARK how the mother's gentle hand
Retains its pleasing sway—
How mild reproof and kind command
The little ones obey;
While to their prattle innocent—
Their romps and merry games,
Her loving heart yields free assent,
Nor their wild transport blames.

Their home, to her, a world appears,
And they its dearest charms,
Where each, in trouble or in tears,
Finds refuge in her arms;
Where each his childish rapture shares
With her who loves the best—
With her whose image sweet it wears
Upon the heart impressed!

Though sweet the love her children feel
Poured out in platitude—
A love that lapsing years reveal,
With steadfast strength induced—
For him, the husband and the sire!
No space or time shall dim,
Nor long extended absence tire
Her loyal love for him!

See joy's soft finger touch her face
On his return at night,
While blushes sweet each other chase,
The tell-tale of delight!
Oh, there is not a nobler scene,
Or one of purer bliss—
Or one more lovely and serene,
In all the world than this!

D. B. W.

R. B. V.—Accubation was a table posture, between sitting and lying, invented by the Greeks and adopted by the Russians and the Jews. About the low dining-table were placed two or three long couches, furnished with more or less sumptuous draperies, on each of which lay usually three persons on their left side, resting either their heads or elbows upon pillows, the feet of the first being behind the back of the second, and those of the second behind that of the third. This posture was indulged in by adults of both sexes, if not of mean condition.

R. T. S.—The Phoenix is a bird of Arabian or Persian—not Grecian—fable. It was said to live five hundred years, then to build itself a nest of spices, flap its wings with such swiftness as to set fire to the pile, and sing while it burned to ashes. But from these ashes it immediately rose with renewed life and vigour and lived another five hundred years, when the same process of consuming and renewing was again gone through. Moore alludes to the Phoenix in his lines in "Paradise and the Peri":

"The enchanted pile of that lonely bird
Who sings it the last of its own death-day,
And in music and perfume dies away."

ZONO.—The following are the various methods of coating pills:—1, sugar coated: very finely powdered sugar, as used by confectioners, &c.; the pill is moistened with gum-mucilage and the pill rolled in it (same way as almonds are coated with sugar, as seen at the "Healtheries"); 2, gelatine coated: rolled in a mixture of gelatine water and glycerine; 3, French chalk coated: pill covered with gum and rolled in the chalk; 4, silver coated: pill gummed and put into a little box with silver leaf and rolled and shaken up; 5, gold coated: the same; 6, some pills are varnish coated. Sugar is the best, as it is the most soluble internally, and gives the pill a better chance.

LOTTIE F.—Simply that he intends to break off the relation between you, either because he is tired of it, or because there is some obstacle—perhaps a wife, perhaps the opposition of parents, inability to support a family, or a doubt if you could make him happy. To write to him would be a useless sacrifice of pride. He might feel called upon to reply, but he evidently does not wish to keep up any connection with you. Make up your mind to this and dismiss him from your thoughts as soon as you can.

W. T.—You ask our opinion about three writers whose style and merits are very diverse. What do we think of Lord Byron, E. P. Roe, and Charlotte Brontë? Byron's poetry is no longer the fashion, but it is unexcelled in fervour, ease, flow of language, and energy and grace of expression. Roe is the author of some very entertaining novels that have always an elevating tendency. We have quite lately read one that we found very natural and charming, "He Fell in Love with His Wife." As for Charlotte Brontë, she is too popular with all the ladies for us to say a word that is not praise.

F. C.—Politeness in society should not be governed by any set rules or phrases, although it is necessary for one to understand the general principles of social intercourse, in order to make his way gracefully in society. If a man, trusting solely to his memory, prepares in his mind what he intends to say to a lady when he is introduced to her, there are nine chances out of ten that he will forget his "nice speech" the moment he is presented, and be so "taken aback" by the circumstance as to appear in an exceedingly awkward and ludicrous light. If it gives you pleasure to be presented to a lady, it is easy enough to tell her so, unless you are a block-head, and we would not willingly believe that of any reader. You must also remember that a gentleman, in conversing with a lady, should not ignore the existence of others that might be around her at the time.

LADYBIRD is a young girl who lives with her widowed father, and took pride in him and in keeping the house neat and pretty until lately, when a shadow has fallen on her home in the shape of a woman with familiar, bold ways that are not like a lady's, who comes to the house to see her father, both when the daughter is at home and when she is away. People have talked to the girl of this woman and her father in a way that hurt her very much. She does not know what to do. Her father never speaks to her about the woman, and she shrinks from telling him how bitterly she dislikes to have her come to the house. Have you not some clerical friend—man or woman—some old friend of the family, to whom you could go for advice? Such a friend might properly undertake to talk to your father, and tell him of the neighbourhood gossip, and that he is showing very little fatherly regard for his daughter in subjecting her to such companionship.

W. F. F.—A person born in March is said to be strong-willed and imperious; will succeed, but will have enemies, and find it difficult to retain love and friendship. So says the "horoscope," but we do not at all guarantee that oracle. A person born on the 1st of March, leap year, celebrates his birthday on the 2nd of March each year except leap year. The anniversary falls just one year from the day of birth. If born on the 29th of February, the anniversary falls on the 1st of March. Every single man is a bachelor—that phrase meaning only an unmarried man. He is an old bachelor at fifty; a woman is an old maid at thirty-five. As to endowment societies, if honestly conducted, they are a help to business men or their families. If you are only thirty you need not despair of being able to fall in love. It is something that comes to all, soon or late, unless to some individual too selfish to love anybody but himself, or too deeply absorbed in intellectual pursuits, like Sir Isaac Newton and a few others.

BELL BLOSSOM writes a nice letter, and asks if it is wrong to let a young man who is making love to her, but has not yet "popped" the question, kiss her when they meet and part, and occasionally in the interval. We'd wait until he pops, Bell Blossom. Keep the kiss as a reward in that case—a sort of prize chromo. Don't make yourself cheap. Let a lover understand that you are worth something. Set a high value on your kisses. If the young man is steady and industrious and loves you, we would take him though we did not love him as the heroines of novels love their adorers. Quiet, respectful affection is a very good basis for marriage. "Love me little, love me long," is a wise maxim. Don't mind being small. All tall men admire *petite* women. They like to be looked up to. Poets have written many pretty things about them. Be dainty, neat, amiable, and winning, and your friends will say you illustrate the old saying that "the most precious things are put up in the smallest parcels."

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